

A Provincial Crime

In a sleepy country town in Sussex, four people are leading quiet, respectable, 'ordinary' lives. On the wealthy outskirts of the town, Olive and Michael Padwick are bringing up their two small children in peace and comfort. In the 'lower' town—to which Michael belonged before he married into wealth and respectability—George Gann and his wife Dorothy keep an untidy grocer's shop.

A casual meeting of these four people upsets the ordered routine of their provincial lives, bringing new and unknown elements of fear and jealousy into their homes. Gann intends to get rich at any price: he is willing to employ all his resources, including the obvious attractions of his wife, for the purpose of using Padwick's name and money as a rung in his ladder to power in the close-knit community of the town. Behind the façade of provincial routine and respectability, the Rotary Club and the 'At Homes', the regular church-going and the children's riding lessons—the desires, ambitions and fears of these four people intensify with a vicious inevitability until, unexpectedly, they are drastically resolved—by murder.

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by
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CASSELL · LONDON

CASELL & COMPANY LTD

35 Red Lion Square • London WC1

and at

MELBOURNE • SYDNEY • TORONTO

CAPE TOWN • AUCKLAND

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First published 1960

Durga Sah Municipal Library,
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Class No. 623.....

Book No. B 70 P.....

Received on Oct- 1962.

Printed in Great Britain by
Ebenezer Baylis and Son, Ltd., The
Trinity Press, Worcester, and London
E.360

I

THE fat local girl of fifteen, who was all they could get as mother's help, tapped on the bedroom door with her foot. Michael Padwick, who had just finished shaving, went to open it and to take the breakfast tray from her hands.

'Thank you, Joan.'

The girl retired to give the two children their breakfast downstairs and Michael put the tray on the table by his wife's bedside. She smiled gently at him as she lay there against the pillow, her throat rising from her pink dressing-gown and her hair pinned up behind her head. She was always so kindly towards him now, since their reconciliation. And he too was patient and polite with her, as he was determined to be—compelled to be, as he saw it, now that she was pregnant. It was for this reason that they had a breakfast tray brought to the bedroom. The doctor was advising as much rest as possible, so that the third baby which she carried, which in its sixth month was starting to be heavy, might not thicken the varicose veins which her two earlier pregnancies had swollen on the back of her legs.

Returning to what she had been saying before the tray arrived, Olive Padwick asked, 'Is it true?'

'If it is, I didn't know.' He was fastening his tie at the mirror of her dressing-table. He looked out of the window, across the garden, to the hump of Verney Down, with the white chalk-pit carved out of it, where it rose above the town. It was going to be another hot day.

'I knew nothing of it. When Lucy asked me, I advised her to sell, because it seemed to be a good offer.'

And so it had. His wife's elderly cousin, Lucy Colwell, owned a pair of shops in the worst end of the High Street. He was mildly surprised, when she came to him for advice, to discover that an offer had been made for these shops by the property syndicate of which he was himself a member. But then, he had not been at the two previous meetings. The share which he held was now small. There were, if he were honest with himself, one or two deals about which he had been uneasy, and he would probably have withdrawn quietly from the syndicate if Gann had not urged him to remain.

But the offer made to Lucy Colwell seemed fair, almost generous. It was sensible to recommend her to accept. Besides, it irritated him that she should gain income from the lower town. That was where he had lived as a boy with his mother, always on the edge of poverty since his father had been killed in the earlier war; while the Colwells resided up here in The Grange, the row of stately old houses with large gardens that looked right over the lower town to the downs beyond. From his bedroom window he could just see, through the trees, the rooftops of the street in which he used to live with his mother—a street of little houses with parlour doors opening straight on to the pavement. When he was a boy there had been no sanitation in the houses themselves, but four lavatories in the common yard at the back, with broken doors, to serve the whole row. On Sunday mornings, when the men had been drunk the night before, they were unusable. Whenever he went out to try to help his mother clean them, she waved him angrily away, refusing to let him be soiled. His father, as she often told him, had held the King's Commission when he

was killed on the Somme. It was Michael, the boy, who himself added the silent conclusion that this was the reward of patriotism, of self-sacrifice; while above, in The Grange, could be seen the reward—of what? Of greed? Of selfishness? That was what he had thought then.

But now, of course, he knew it could not be put so simply. The Colwells, who to him represented The Grange, were neither greedy nor selfish. The old man, his wife's father, Peter Colwell, had made his money as an honest working builder, and had invested it at moderate rates of interest. At St. Clement's he was devout, compassionate, and a churchwarden. And Olive, his daughter, who had inherited the £20,000 he had accumulated during his lifetime, made no pretentious use of it.

Michael went to sit on the edge of his own bed, from which the blankets were thrown back, and took a plateful of cereal from the tray. Olive poured him a cup of tea.

'Of course, Lucy had very small rent from the shops,' she said, placating him.

And deserved no more from such wretched property. Yet once they had seemed to him satisfactory: the butcher's at which his mother searched for the cheapest cuts, and the sweetshop in which he laid out his occasional pence on his way to the grammar school, half-way up the hill, to which he went on a scholarship. He was glad the shops were no longer owned by a Colwell. All the same, if it were true that Woolworth's had sought permission to build there, then it looked very much as though cousin Lucy had been done.

'If it's true,' he said, taking the toast which Olive had spread with marmalade for him, 'I'll have it put right. Lucy shan't suffer.'

He was uncomfortably aware that Gann had probably

been using advance knowledge which he had no doubt acquired from some garrulous local councillor.

'I'll talk to Gann about it,' he said. He saw her pain at the mere mention of the name. Ah well, she would have to overcome that for herself. 'My advice, when I gave it, was well meant.'

'Of course, darling.' She let her hand relax on to the pillow.

Michael drank his tea and said that he must go. He stooped over the bed to kiss her forehead, catching for a moment the thin, delicate odour of her, like something newly washed.

'I'll tell Joan to send the children up,' he said. 'I shan't be in to lunch, of course, as it's Friday.' Friday was the day of the Rotary Club luncheon at the Stag. 'Anything you want? Paper?' He passed her the *Mail*, taking the *Telegraph* for himself. Then he left the room, smiling awkwardly at her from the door. One of the things he found difficult to do, since their reconciliation, was to get out of her presence without embarrassment.

On his way through the hall he went into the sitting-room to retrieve his pen, which he had left there the previous evening. The room looked prim and unused, for it was always Olive's custom to tidy it before going to bed, to shake and pummel the cushions of the settee and chairs into their full convex shapes, to draw back the curtains from the tall windows. The furniture was stiff and thin-legged—lovely little family pieces, as cousin Lucy Colwell liked to remark, a reminder that the family was hers, not his. He picked up his pen, went out again into the hall and put his head round the playroom door. The children were at the breakfast table, Anthony at one end and Martha at the side, with Joan, the mother's help, beside her.

‘Good morning, children,’ he said.

Martha smiled round at him. She was the cheerful, happy one of the family for whom he felt grateful. Anthony sat as solemn as usual, his face mock-elderly; he grew more and more like his grandfather, seemed almost to have the same stoop to his shoulders. It was odd that the little girl should be so happy, and the boy so solemn, for his conception had been a celebration, and hers a moment of despair. It was during the week’s leave that Michael was granted after he returned from Dunkirk that Olive, in gratitude, took him into her bed with unusual pleasure. They spent the week in a small hotel near Weymouth. He could remember the way she trembled, as she never had before, when he got into bed with her; and the submissive sigh afterwards. During one of those nights, Anthony began.

Whereas Martha was the fruit of Olive’s despair when, shortly before Alamein, Michael was posted to the Middle East. That time it was embarkation leave and, since the bombing had died down and he then had captain’s pay, they spent it in London, at the Savoy. Olive desperately wanted another child, he knew, in case he should not return. Each night, as though encouraged by and yet a little ashamed of the luxury and expense of the hotel room, she joined with him more wantonly than he had expected of her. He felt that she did not act thus from enjoyment, but in the belief that her fervour, and his, might increase her chance of fertility. No doubt this was medical nonsense, but the result, all the same, was Martha.

He looked at the two of them having breakfast, the sequel to Dunkirk and the preface to Alamein, now aged eleven and nine, and Michael smiled wryly. Their third child, yet to be born, would mark the domestic battle at

the end of which he formally gave up his mistress and was reconciled to his wife and respectability.

'Send the children up to Mrs. Padwick, Joan,' he said, 'when they've finished breakfast.'

He withdrew and went into his own room for his briefcase; then through into the garage, chucking the case into the Jaguar. He got into the car, backing it gracefully into the driveway, turning through the wrought-iron gate on to the road in the shadow of the trees.

The shops were just open. A woman was arranging vegetables on the racks outside one of them, a man mopping at the pavement and then swilling across it a bucket of water. The day was already starting to heat.

At the end of the High Street he turned his car alongside the river that here ran straight, like a canal, before twisting across the marshy plain that emerged from the Weald and pierced between the downs. He drove into a builder's yard through open gates on which was painted, 'P. T. Colwell Ltd., Builders and Contractors', left his car in the shed, nodded to the foreman and went into his office, which faced on one side into the yard, and on the other across the river and the plain. His girl, Sylvia, had set the post out on his desk, and he glanced at it casually; nothing important, nothing much to do. The firm was building a couple of bungalows for people who had licences, and it shared in a contract for development of the council estate on the outskirts. Otherwise, save for some odd decorating jobs, nothing. The building trade still stagnated from the war. Michael would long since have found the job too boring to continue, had he not seasoned it with speculation in property. That was where the money was to be had. In the few years since the war, with the help latterly of the property syndicate to which Gann had introduced him, Michael had made enough, tax

free, to rival the sum which had been left to his wife by her father. That gratified him. For there were one or two moments for which he would not forgive Colwell.

One was in the very early days of his acquaintance with Olive, when she was still at the girls' high school, and he had just left the grammar to become a clerk in the local building society. In the excitement of earning a wage, he asked her to the pictures on a Saturday night. She had to ask her father; her mother had been dead for some years already. Colwell had more sense than to forbid her to go. But when Michael arrived to collect her, Colwell said to him bluntly, while she stood there, 'Now mind, bring her straight home, and no monkeying about.' While the boy was still flushing, he took two half-crowns from his waistcoat pocket, and added, 'Here's the money for the seats.' Years afterwards Michael could feel the shame at not having refused the five shillings, but having put them meekly in his pocket, muttering embarrassed thanks.

But then, Colwell hated him—not for himself in particular; he was too contemptuous to bother about him as an individual—he hated him as a young man who came near his daughter. Colwell's dream, no doubt, was of a daughter who never left him, never allowed any intrusion into her single love for him. And Olive regarded every natural impulse as a disloyalty towards him. The first time that Michael kissed her, for instance. She had invited him to tea in the garden. Colwell was not there, but he had left cousin Lucy as watchdog. Something or other called Lucy into the house. Olive was sitting on the swing seat with a canopy over and behind it. Braving himself, Michael sat beside her and touched her hand, which she did not withdraw. Then he leaned over and kissed her—clumsily enough. Her immediate response was delight,

but then she drew away from him, whispering, 'No, no, Michael. We mustn't.' And she would not kiss him again. She repeated, 'We mustn't. It's not right.'

Colwell's weapon, in those days, was humiliation. He pretended to a great admiration for Michael's mother, so as to lose no opportunity for emphasizing her poverty. His line was that Michael should be grateful to his mother for giving him a respectable start in life, struggle though it must have been for her. All Michael could murmur was that he was indeed grateful; but silently he was in a rage with this coarse old man who flaunted his money as though it were a pedigree. How dared he? Colwell's father had been a local plumber, content to the end of his working life to travel through the town on an old bicycle with his tools in a cloth bag slung on the handlebars. Whereas Michael's father was an accountant, and an officer. But all this was of no weight against the fact that Colwell was rich.

Olive's relationship with Michael was of slow growth. Looking back, he supposed it was true that she was gradually falling in love with him. But they would probably never have arrived at marriage, had it not been for the war.

For Michael, the outbreak of war was a relief. He was twenty-four years old, held by then a secure but scantily paid post in the building society, and was bored. As a Territorial he was called up instantly, and assumed a new status in his private world. This was what clinched things with the Colwells. For old Peter Colwell the war was the supreme disaster. He stooped more; his brisk step became a slouch. His arrogance towards Michael vanished. Instead, when he came back to the town in uniform and went up to call at The Grange, Colwell almost deferred to him. Except for a few flashes—as, for instance, a

sudden, passionate defence of Chamberlain—he meekly accepted Michael's views on events. His face was older and greyer, and he had become an addict to news bulletins on the radio. Michael was puzzled to know just what the old man feared. There was at that time no thought of invasion. Bombing of such a country town was unlikely. Colwell's fortune was sufficient to withstand any probable effects of war. What he seemed mostly to fear was that he would be cheated of fullness in the last years of his life, and would never see a Britain victorious and at peace in which his money could again command respect, but would die before the war ended. In fact he lasted until 1947. Meanwhile he appeared to need to lean on Michael, to accept him for the first time as a man, and as a husband for Olive.

Once her father's hostility had gone, the engagement was Olive's life. She put Michael's photograph, in his uniform, on her dressing table, and wrote him long, intelligent, charming letters. While he was away she spent much time with his mother, and together the two women launched into various works of war—knitting, sewing, canteens and the like. Michael had been posted to France. On his first home leave of forty-eight hours Olive was radiant; he never remembered seeing her so lovely and so happy. Cars were then still not laid up, and they drove to Eastbourne for dinner in one of the vast, sombre hotels. It was a pleasant spring evening. On the way back he drew the car up in a lane, and she acquiesced in his kisses. But when he started to unbutton her blouse, she begged unhappily, 'Please, no, Michael.'

'Then let's get married soon,' he whispered. And she replied, 'Yes, darling. Soon.'

A month later he managed to get a week's leave. They were married in St. Clement's, and Olive wore white,

wartime though it was. His mother wept—traditionally, Michael thought, until he remembered that a young man in khaki had been at the centre of her own life. Then he kissed her as gently as he could, and was gratified by the understanding that Olive showed her, and by how well those two seemed to like each other. Old Colwell tried to hide his moroseness.

They spent their honeymoon in a small hotel near Rye, with a view over the marshland, and the sea wall, and the waves beyond. Her modesty delighted and inflamed him. When he turned away from the window into the room, and drew back the bedclothes, she had clad herself in a nightdress that hid the slightness of her figure. 'Put out the light,' she begged. At the end of the week he took her back to The Grange, where she would remain, of course, while he returned to France. At the sight of her father she broke into tears. Colwell, after the long lonely week without her, was abrupt and curt, snapping out his disapproval of the way in which the war was being conducted; the months practically without fighting had put renewed courage into old men.

It was not like this, however, that Michael chiefly remembered his father-in-law, but as the sour, frustrated old man which he became when the war ended, and the socialists took power. This was the final stroke at the serenity of his old age. He refused to retire, although he took Michael into the business as he had promised. Colwell used to come stumping into his office—the office in which Michael was now standing—to rage at some new idiotic planning regulation which he had just discovered, or at the rudeness and idleness of the labourers they employed, or the flagrant dishonesty of a rival. The irritation of his business became the occupation of Colwell's last two years, for he had lost much interest in

his daughter, and of his grandchildren he was fond passionately but spasmodically.

Coming out of his reverie, Michael read through the letters which the girl had put on his desk, then rang the buzzer for her and dictated replies. He called in the foreman and gave him some instructions. When the man had gone, he stood up and looked out of the window, trying to make up his mind. There were two boys fishing in the river just beyond the first bend, absorbed. A dinghy with a red sail was making its way slowly down towards the hidden sea. The marsh-water glittered in the morning sunlight. Michael stood at the window for a while, gazing without seeing, then returned to his desk, picked up his phone receiver, and gave George Gann's number. He hoped fervently that it would not be Dorothy who answered. Their phone was on a shelf at the back of the shop, and whichever of them was not at the time serving a customer would answer it. If it were Dorothy, he did not think he would have the strength of will to speak to her, but would have to replace the phone without a word, and try later. However, it was a man's voice that answered: 'Gann's Stores.'

'It's Michael Padwick.'

'Oh. Good morning.' There was a quality of slyness about Gann's voice which was discernible only through a telephone.

'Are you very busy this morning? I'm not keeping you from a customer?'

'No, no, Mr. Padwick.'

'I wanted to have a word with you on syndicate business.'

'Ah yes. A pity you missed the last meeting.'

Michael said, 'Not over the phone, I think. It's a little complicated.'

'Will you come round here, then?'

'No,' said Michael quickly. If he did, he would be sure to see Dorothy. 'I'm pretty tied up this morning. How about lunch-time? It's Rotary today. Could you come along as my guest?'

'I'd like to very much.'

'Suppose you come to my office, and we can run up in the car. And if you could get here a bit early we could have a chat first.'

When he had hung up, Michael considered how he would deal with Gann. It would not be easy. One could enter Gann's shop, in the lower town, and see only a small grocer. The goods were piled on the counter and on the shelves at the back, and even suspended above the counter from the ceiling like a curtain. On the back of the door a small bell was fastened on a curved spring, that jangled whenever the door was opened. The bell, which had been put there in Gann's uncle's day, was not now needed, for the shop was never left unserved, but Gann had not taken the trouble to unscrew it. There was that lazy factor in his character which was sometimes evident also in his appearance. His heavy, dark face with protuberant forehead and eyebrows usually wore a little smile that could have been indolent and was certainly secretive. He was not tall, but he moved with the slow deliberation of a big man. He spoke, too, in a drawl; or perhaps not so much a drawl as a curious accent, basically the flat tone of Sussex speech but overlaid with inflexions from many parts of the world. He claimed to have been a child here in the town, an orphan in the care of his uncle who owned the grocer's shop, but to have run away when he was twelve and shipped out from Newhaven in a collier. From that time, by his own story, he wandered the world, mostly in ships and in seaport towns, until he heard of the death of his uncle, and his legacy of the shop.

Then he came back, bringing a wife with him. It seemed odd that a man who had wandered so far should be content to settle into a small grocery business in this town where he had been a boy. Gann himself smiled and said, 'It's a comfortable living.'

Once Gann described to him a moment of his childhood: 'Tuesdays was market day then, Mr. Padwick. They held the market same place as they do now, but it was much bigger in those days, mostly sheep. The downs were covered with sheep then, though now they've ploughed 'em, and declare they can't get the shepherds. I mind going up past the Stag one Tuesday—it was an old-fashioned place then, Mr. Padwick, not dressed up like it is now with cocktail bars and such. Through the door into the yard I could see into the big dining-room, all dark wood and white table-cloths. I forget just what I was doing up there that day, perhaps an errand for my uncle. And at all the tables were sitting the farmers and the agents, his lordship's man from the hall, and the seed merchants, and one or two of the best-heeled traders of the town. They had big blue plates in the dining-room in those days—I can see 'em now—and the waiters were running back and forth with 'em, and the food pile was high, and every man had his tankard. They were all laughing and shouting. And I can mind standing at that door, Mr. Padwick, looking in—just a young chap I was then, perhaps nine or ten years old—and thinking that there was riches, and safety, and the life a man could crave for. I'll not forget it.'

Michael laughed. 'Not much of that sort of security these days, George.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure, Mr. Padwick. Different people, of course. Not farmers any more. But in a town like this, even these days . . .'

He meant, Michael realized, himself and the business men like him. Now that he had returned to the town, with the grocer's shop to provide a living, Gann intended to join that security. Property was the thing, particularly office and shop property. Gann presumably had no capital, and how he had ingratiated himself with the syndicate Michael had no idea. The syndicate dwelt in Brighton, and had tentacles out into London and even further north, as far as Manchester. It was not, in the London sense, a syndicate of any importance, but it made a fair killing locally. Gann had probably offered himself, Michael thought, as the syndicate's agent in this small, backwater town. There was money, even in so old-fashioned a place; retirement money, most of it, left to the elderly widows of tradesmen, but also local business money—Michael's for instance. He had possibly been the bait with which Gann first attracted the syndicate. At any rate, Gann had been assiduous in trying to know him.

Their first meeting was in the bar of the Stag one winter's evening. It could have been accidental, but, looking back, Michael thought that it probably was not. He did not, at the time, go much to the Stag of an evening. Olive disliked the idea of his mixing with the drinkers of the town. On that particular evening he was acting as treasurer of a small tennis club of which Olive was a member. The club's annual business meeting was held in a room upstairs at the Stag, and naturally concluded with a session in the bar.

On the committee of the club was Frank Jenkins, the stationmaster, who insisted that he was in the chair for that round. As he handed Michael his whisky, he said, 'Oh, by the way, I want you to meet George Gann, who used to live here years ago, and has come back to run a

little business his uncle left him. George, this is Mr. Padwick.'

The first impression Michael had of Gann was, naturally, casual: a swarthy face with an ingratiating, almost an apologetic, smile.

'If you want some eggs or butter,' said Jenkins, 'Gann's the chap to fix it for you.'

'Come now, Frank,' protested Gann, 'Mr. Padwick'll think I'm in the black market.'

'So you are,' replied Jenkins with a laugh, moving off to deliver drinks to others in his round.

'It's because I have a grocer's shop,' explained Gann, still smiling, 'and sometimes oblige my friends with an odd thing or two they happen to have run out of. Whisky, now. There's not much call for it in my district, and I get a surprisingly big allocation. I think my uncle must have drank it himself. So if you've any difficulty in getting a supply, Mr. Padwick . . .'

Michael thanked him curtly. But, of course, the man's approach might have been friendliness rather than impertinence. Jenkins came back and several of them got into a ring, talking. Gann stood modestly on the edge of the ring, but when he was brought into the conversation, spoke with more intelligence and authority than the others. Then stood quiet again. Michael felt he had been unjust, and that the chap was probably quite all right, and simply trying, perhaps nervously, to be amiable. When the time came, therefore, for his round, he included Gann with care. 'Now, Mr. Gann, what about you? Won't you change to a short?'

'Thank you, no, Mr. Padwick. Just a half of mild, thanks.'

Soon afterwards they began to disperse. Gann said to Michael, as they went towards the gents' lavatory before

leaving, 'By the way, Mr. Padwick, I meant it about that whisky. It's sometimes difficult to get all a man wants these days, and I really have got more than I can sell. So if you're passing in my direction any time, and like to look in . . .'

'Thanks, I'll hold you to that.' A fresh source of whisky was not, after all, to be scorned; his own wine merchant limited him to a couple of bottles a month, and not always proprietary. Probably this fellow would want paying a little over the odds. But that was to be expected. He asked for the address of his shop. It was in the very farthest part of the lower town.

'Of course I know it,' he said. 'A shop on the corner. Used to be kept by a funny old man with a squint—oh, sorry, that would have been your uncle.'

Gann grinned. 'It would. He had a hell of a squint.'

It was more than two weeks later that Michael paid his first visit to Gann's shop. He went because he had run out of whisky and suddenly recalled the man's offer. So when he left his office for the day, he turned his car towards the lower town. He knew roughly where the shop lay, but could not exactly remember the turnings; and found himself driving down the street in which he had lived as a boy, and which he had not visited for years—certainly not since his mother died. As he drove his big car slowly down the narrow street he felt a curious mixture of nostalgia and revulsion. The actual house drew his eyes. The front door was reasonably painted, the lace curtains to the windows were clean, and from the lower window-ledge a china dog peered out through the glass. Michael glanced upwards at the first-floor window behind which his mother had slept; his own bedroom, in which he had sat for evening after evening doing his homework, was at the back. He had a little involun-

tary tremor, of the kind which is described as 'someone walking over your grave'.

By the time he drew up outside Gann's shop, it was nearly half past five. The evening was already dark, and the shop was not well lit. There were two women customers, one at the far end of the counter waiting to be served, and one offering her shopping basket into which Gann, in a white overall, was putting groceries. When he looked up and saw who had entered his shop, he smiled with pleasure.

'Mr. Padwick. Good evening. I won't keep you a moment, sir.' Taking the pencil from his overall breast-pocket, he totted up a sum on the blue bag of sugar he was about to put into the woman's basket, then called to the rear of the shop: 'Dorothy.'

Of the woman who came in through the door at the back, Michael at first observed only that she was surprisingly young and attractive. She had dark brown hair that, in this dim light, looked almost black, large eyes in a pale oval face, and a mouth heavily lipsticked. She too was wearing a white overall.

'This is my wife,' said Gann. 'This is Mr. Padwick, Dorothy.' She gave him a friendly, incurious smile. 'We're just about to close,' he went on, 'and I do hope you'll step upstairs and have a glass of something with us.' Then, moving to the woman customer waiting with some impatience, 'Yes, madam?'

Producing a tin can from behind her coat, she handed it over for paraffin. Gann took it and moved towards the rear door. 'Dorothy, take Mr. Padwick upstairs. I'll close the shop, and be up in a few minutes. Now, Mr. Padwick, you really must give us that pleasure.'

His wife, smiling still, lifted a flap in the counter and invited Michael to come through. As he followed her he

noticed with some curiosity the jumble of goods crammed beneath the counter, like the tricks waiting beneath a conjurer's table. Dorothy Gann led him into a passage from which a staircase rose to the living quarters. The woodwork of the stairs was painted chocolate brown, the carpet worn, and spaced on the rising wall were three cheap hunting prints in wooden frames. She turned to mount the stairs, he following, trying not to look at the movement of her legs. Her high heels were worn on the inside edges, and the seam of one of her stockings was twisted. At the top of the stairs a short passage led to the living-room. On the way it passed the open door of a bedroom in which Michael saw that the double bed, unmade even at this hour and with the bedlinen in a heap at its foot, bore still the imprints of the two bodies that had lain there the night before. She took not the smallest notice of this, but walked casually ahead to open the door to the living-room, switch on the light and invite him to enter. The room, over the front of the shop, looked out through lace curtains across the lamplit street corner. It was furnished without the least taste. Dorothy Gann went to draw the blue curtains across the windows and as she turned back into the room he saw her in full light for the first time, and stared. She was quite remarkably lovely. Her face, with the lips slightly parted, had a clear, innocent look that was set off by the experienced pose of her body. He suddenly became aware that he was staring at her, and that she saw it too, but was unperturbed. It was almost as if she carefully held the pose for a moment longer, with that gentle smile on her mouth, before stepping forward and asking him to sit down. 'George'll be up in a few minutes. I can hear him locking the front now.'

He sat on the sofa, and she in one of the hard armchairs.

Searching for conversation, he said, 'I hear you haven't been in the town very long, Mrs. Gann. Do you like it?'

'It's all right. One place is as good as another.'

'Do you know this part of the country well? Are you from Sussex?'

'No,' she said. 'Liverpool.' As she said it he recognized the touch of scowse in her accent, the slight nasal sound. 'I like Brighton,' she offered.

Michael laughed. 'Everybody likes Brighton.' He was wondering how on earth a middle-aged ruffian had got himself a wife so young, so fresh, and yet so lecherous-looking. When Gann, a minute or so later, came into the room, Michael looked at him with curiosity for the first time.

Gann had taken off his overall and left it downstairs. He saw that his wife was still wearing hers and remonstrated with her. She shrugged her shoulders lazily.

'Here, let me have it,' said Gann, going across and taking it off her, pulling it from her arms. Beneath it she was wearing a tight green wool dress and, Michael thought, not much else.

Gann stepped out to hang the overall on a peg in the passage, and then came back asking Michael what he would drink. 'Scotch?'

'If you can spare it.'

'Plenty, I assure you,' said Gann, going to the sideboard and getting out bottle, glasses and syphon. 'I shall join you. My wife isn't a spirit drinker, but she likes a little sherry wine. I get it sweet for her.' He smiled. 'You know the ladies' taste.'

He brought Michael his drink first, poured a small glass of brown sherry for his wife, and sat on the arm of her chair. 'Your good health, Mr. Padwick.'

'Cheers.'

The man sat looking down at his wife and smiling, not as though in affection, but as though he were showing her off, boasting what a desirable woman he had. She seemed quite indifferent to this, though once, as he went on talking, she looked up at him with a little amused twist to her mouth, like an intimacy. Michael, remembering the unmade bed in the next room, had a sudden sense of debauchery between these two, of viciousness that the man had taught her.

Gann asked, 'Now, how many bottles do you want?'

'Bottles? Oh yes, the whisky. Well, how many can you spare?'

'Half a dozen?'

'Good heavens. I can't deprive you of as many as that. If you really mean it, perhaps three. . . .'

'I'll get them. Is Haig all right?'

'Wonderful.'

He went below to his shop to get the bottles. Michael, left alone with Dorothy, broke into conversation—any conversation. 'You really must meet my wife, Mrs. Gann.'

'What's she like?'

'Well, she's—she's very nice.'

Dorothy laughed. 'Would she like me?'

'I can't imagine anybody not liking you.'

'Can't you? Most women don't.'

Michael could only laugh nervously. 'Anyway, I'm sure Olive would like to know you.'

Gann returned with the whisky, which Michael took with thanks.

'Now, Mr. Gann, you're going to permit me, I hope, to pay a little over the odds for these.'

'No, no. All I'll take is the retail price. I can't get rid of the stuff to my customers, they can't run to it.'

'Well, it's very good of you,' said Michael, giving him the money. 'Really very good of you indeed.'

'Let me know when you want some more.'

'You overwhelm me.'

Gann smiled. 'It's been a great pleasure to have you in our house, Mr. Padwick. And I hope it's not for the last time.'

'No, indeed. And you must come and see us too.'

'That would be very nice,' said Gann, standing there, not with the subservience of the shopkeeper, but easily, with a sort of dark confidence.

Michael turned to Dorothy. 'Well, good night, Mrs. Gann, and thank you. I'll get my wife to ring you.'

She smiled up at him, touching the hand he held out, but saying nothing. Gann escorted him downstairs, letting him out through the side door into the street round the corner from his car. Thanking him again, Michael drove slowly away.

And that was how he had met Dorothy for the first time. That was the beginning of the story that had been so turbulent, and was now ended. Michael stared at his hands lying on the blotter of his desk. Then he shifted them awkwardly, put them into his pockets, rose from the desk and went over to the window to gaze out again at the marshland and the river.

'At a quarter past twelve, Gann was announced at the office. In spite of the heat he wore a hat and a light macintosh, as though for formality. And he had, of course, walked from his shop. He did not own a car, though Michael knew he could well afford one. 'What do you do with your money?' he had once asked him, but all that Gann replied was that the small sum he could save was tucked away in a couple of houses; at which Michael had laughed.

'Good morning,' he said to Gann now. 'Thank you for coming round early, there's something I want to talk over with you.'

Gann took off his macintosh and hat, and hung them on the stand behind the door. Then he sat in the chair opposite Michael's desk and inclined his head towards him attentively.

'It's that business of the two shops that belonged to Miss Colwell,' began Michael. 'I wish, really, we hadn't got involved in that.'

'You think we've made a mistake?'

'No, no. It's not that. But Miss Colwell being related to my wife makes it awkward for me. It never works to mix family with business.' He thought he detected Gann's eye flickering ironically around the office of the business into which he had married. 'As a matter of fact, George, I'm in a bit of a fix about those shops. When the matter came up, I wasn't at the meeting.'

'Pity. We don't see enough of you these days, Mr. Padwick.'

'When she got the offer, Miss Colwell came to me for advice as to whether she should sell. I told her I thought it a good offer. As I did.'

'And as it was,' added Gann.

'Hmm. Yes, it was, at the time. But now there's some rumour that Woolworth's are going to build there.'

'I've heard the rumour too. I hope it's true, Mr. Padwick. We shall do very nicely if it is.'

'You know nothing definite?'

'Of course not.'

After a pause, which made his meaning quite clear, Michael said, 'You see the difficulty I'm in, George. If it's true, the syndicate'll make a profit of at least £10,000 on that deal. The figure is certain to come out, in a town of

this size, and Miss Colwell will be convinced that I knew of it in advance, and have deliberately cheated her. Of course, I didn't know of it in advance, and no more did you. But perhaps somebody in the syndicate did.'

'Oh, as to that I couldn't say.'

'Naturally. But just in case they did, I want to reverse the deal, George.'

'I don't quite follow.'

'I want Miss Colwell to have her two shops back. It goes without saying that I'll defray all the expenses, and put up some sort of sum as compensation for your trouble—for the syndicate's trouble, that is.'

Gann sat staring softly at him. Then he said, 'But, Mr. Padwick, it doesn't depend on me.'

'I think you and I together could persuade the others, don't you, George?'

'Dear me,' murmured Gann. 'I don't know that I want to try.'

It was at this point that Michael would have to put on a little more pressure, but the question was, exactly how much?

'Olive is most anxious that I shouldn't get mixed up in any quarrel with her cousin. And at this time, when she's going to have another baby, I don't want to upset her in any way.'

'Oh no, of course not. That's most important.'

'So I'd be willing to incur quite an obligation, George, to put this matter right—within reason, of course. I'm not Woolworth's.'

'Ah, there's the snag, Mr. Padwick. If so be, that is, that the rumour's true.'

'If I couldn't put it right,' went on Michael quickly, 'I'd have to withdraw from the syndicate. And my wife would be most reluctant for me to continue with any of

the associates. Now that's the last thing I want to happen.' Was the threat, he wondered, put strongly enough? Or too strongly? Anyway, it was essential now to dart away from it. He glanced at his watch and said, 'Ah well, let's talk about it again later. If we don't cut off now we'll be too late for a drink before lunch.'

They got into the car and Michael drove it out of the yard and up the hill to the Stag, and led Gann into the upper room where the Rotarians were assembling, pinning their names and occupations to the lapels of their jackets, contributing to various Rotary charities by signing books which fellow Rotarians carried round, and hastily ordering gins and tonic at the bar before the serious business of the luncheon should begin. Michael joined the nearest group, accepting with the requisite brisk *bonhomie* the proffered drinks. He edged Gann into the conversation, knowing the difficulties. The Rotarians were the wealthiest and most successful men of the town, and they did not wish to acknowledge rivals even of a lowly kind. Michael looked round the small group at the bar—Horsfall, solicitor and commissioner for oaths; John Lumley, insurance; the Rev. Harry Potts, vicar of St. Clement's, who was not only thus the senior local representative of the Almighty, but the club's chaplain also; Alex Wright, ironmonger.

Horsfall had turned to Gann and was engaging him in conversation. It was easier for Horsfall, as a professional man, to do this; besides, it was coming to be known that Gann was mixed up in property deals, and presumably was good for some conveyancing, if not actual litigation.

The head waiter now indicated to Frank Jenkins, who was in the chair, that the soup was ready. The Rotarians and guests hastily gulped what remained of their drinks

and filed into the adjoining dining-room. The Rev. Harry Potts said grace. And the head waiter unleashed his troops to ladle the soup; he himself quickly traversing the lines of Rotarians to take drink orders, mostly for beer.

Groups that had been drinking together usually sat down together, so Gann still had Horsfall on his left to talk to. Michael thought with amusement how Horsfall's legal mind would relish the dispute that might be coming over cousin Lucy Colwell's shops. His only method, Michael thought, as the waiters came skidding round with the roast lamb and vegetables, was to make Gann see that it would be to his own advantage in the long run. Michael, with his standing in the town, could switch a lot of deals in his direction—or away from it. But it was a somewhat theoretic advantage to set against the certain cash profit from the deal. Michael tried to estimate what Gann would get out of it. He was pretty sure that the man had some sort of hidden commission on business that he put into the syndicate's way, and then there was his own share in the syndicate itself, which might by now be fairly substantial. He probably stood in, on this deal, for a profit of around a thousand pounds. It would be a task to make him surrender such a sum; but surrender it he must.

When Horsfall was diverted by his other neighbour, Michael had the chance to say something more to Gann.

'Oh, by the way, George, to return to that little matter we were discussing. . . . ' He waited, but Gann said nothing, only chewed the slice of lamb he had just placed in his mouth. 'I really am serious about it. I know you'll understand. If the deal went through, and Miss Colwell thought she'd been done . . . '

'She didn't have to sell. And you said yourself it was a fair offer.'

'Of course. My dear chap, you and I know that she hasn't been done, or anything of that sort. I'm not suggesting it for a moment. But you know what women are.'

'Oh yes,' said Gann quietly.

'Seriously, George, I would have no option but to withdraw from the syndicate, and cut off all further business association with you.'

Gann carefully selected another piece of lamb and put it into his mouth. 'That would be a great pity, Mr. Padwick.'

'Of course it would. I don't want it to happen.'

After a pause, Gann said, 'As a matter of fact, I'd been wondering whether something was troubling you.'

'How do you mean? Why?'

'We don't seem to see you as much as we did, Mr. Padwick. It must be months since you looked in to visit.'

'I've been terribly busy,' Michael said in excuse, 'and, now that Olive is having another baby, I have to spend as much time as I can with her.'

'Naturally. That's understood. But we miss you, you know. Dorothy was saying only the other day, "It's ages since we saw Mr. Padwick," she said.'

Michael was sure that Dorothy had said nothing of the kind. So what was the point of George's remark? Was it just polite nothing? Or was it threat returned for threat?

'Kind of her to think of me,' he said.

'Oh, she thinks a great deal of you. She was saying the other day, as I tell you, that she wished you were coming round to see us again. If you could spare the time, you know how pleased we should both be.'

By now the waiters had cleared off the main dishes, and were dealing a quick hand of cabinet pudding. At the top table, Frank Jenkins rapped and gave the loyal toast, to

which several of the Rotarians added a dutiful, 'God bless her'. They all sat down again, producing their cigarette cases. Then Frank Jenkins was up, making the club announcements, and introducing the speaker of the day, Mr. Ian Munro, the noted explorer, who had recently returned from an expedition to the Matto Grosso. Mr. Munro was a tall, lean man, in a thick tweed suit. The tweed suit, Michael idly thought, was a good touch. It gave just the hint of an idea of the heat of the Matto Grosso from which Mr. Munro had recently returned, in comparison with the milder heat of a Sussex summer day. Mr. Munro was soon well launched into his description of the natives and their curious habits. Michael looked round at his fellow townsmen who had broken into their Friday of business to sit for twenty minutes to listen to this account of distant tribes in whom they had not the slightest interest. Most of them had never been further abroad than Ostend, and several had never crossed the Channel. The savage sexual practices at which Mr. Munro was hinting put a half-embarrassed gleam into their eyes, though their own sexual customs and taboos were quite as complicated and interesting. The absurdity of the thing struck Michael. But then, what life was not faintly ridiculous and boring? So he had felt, at least, since he saw no more of Dorothy. He slightly swivelled his head and looked covertly at her husband, who was sitting quietly listening to the speaker, with a gentle smile on his lips. The probability was, thought Michael, that Gann had himself been to the Matto Grosso, and knew a good deal more about its rites and customs than Mr. Munro had ever experienced. That was the most irritating thing about George Gann; he made one feel immature.

THAT evening, when Michael returned home, Lucy Colwell was there. Olive met him as he entered the hall, to warn him.

'I asked her to supper. I hope you don't mind. But she's very worried, darling. She has heard something about those shops of hers.'

'And she wants my advice! Listen, Olive, I wish she wouldn't ask me.'

'She has no one else.'

Michael went to wash his hands, and pick up a tray of drinks from the dining-room and some ice from the fridge in the empty kitchen. The two women were sitting on the lawn in the shade of a tall green umbrella, Olive in an upright canvas chair because of her pregnancy. The garden, with its prospect across the town to the downs, had the parched colour of a dry July. The flower-beds were not as lovely this year as most, but that was because Olive could do no gardening this summer; it was usually one of her devotions. Indeed, the garden was the setting to a great deal of her life. In a sense, it was there she had grown up and fallen in love, and now her children were growing up there in turn; Martha's red tricycle stood abandoned on the gravel path by the rosebeds. And it was here that Lucy Colwell had been posted chaperone against him; and now she was simply an elderly visitor, a hanger-on. She had deteriorated, too, physically. Her chest seemed to have sunk in, and her back to have humped. Every winter she had bronchitis. But her hips and legs were still thick. Her hair, which had always straggled, was now grey wisps, and her eyes were sharp with the desires that had never been satisfied.

Putting the drinks on the wicker table, Michael dutifully greeted her. 'Even the evenings don't seem to cool down. What a summer we're having.'

'The heat must be a great trial to you, Olive,' said Lucy, 'with the baby coming.'

'I thought this afternoon I should never stand it.'

'Personally, of course, I love it,' said Lucy possessively; this, at least, the sunshine, she could have. 'Though I'm compelled to guard my face, I have such delicate skin.'

Michael only half listened as the old girl chattered on. With his collar pulled open and the glass frosting in his hand, he lazily contemplated Olive. Harry Potts, the vicar, had once said to him, with great seriousness, 'Your wife is a true Christian, Michael.' That was after the business of their previous mother's help, the one before Joan. The girl had got into trouble, and when this became evident, Olive refused to turn her out of the house. The man was already married, so there was no solution there. Olive saw the girl through her pregnancy, and then the child was born a mongol. She grieved as though it had been her own. For a few wild days she wanted to adopt it. When she was dissuaded from that, and the girl begged that the child should not be taken from her, Olive refused to let them put it in a home, and paid the girl a wage sufficient for her to continue to live at her mother's house without working. That was in a village about three miles away. Sometimes when Michael happened to drive through it he saw the child lolling at the cottage door, and shuddered to think that Olive had contemplated that they should possess it.

At last Joan came into the garden to say that supper was ready. Michael helped Olive from her chair, offered a perfunctory hand to Lucy, and picked up the drinks tray

to follow them in. There was cold lamb for him to carve. With knife poised, he asked, 'Another slice, Lucy?'

'Well, perhaps a very small one,' she said, greedily inspecting her plate. It was important to her now to indulge every small greed. She said with a high-pitched little laugh, 'I usually eat so little. Just peck at my food. But this hot weather, I don't know why, I get really hungry. Quite the other way round from most people,' she added, declaring her differentness and importance.

When they had nearly finished eating, Lucy turned to Michael with the assumed timidity of a woman venturing into a man's realm, and said, 'Oh, Michael, I wanted to ask your advice again about that little property of mine.'

'I'm not sure that you're wise. My advice doesn't seem to have been very good.'

'Do you think, then, that I did wrong, after all?'

He pushed back his chair, trying to be patient. The money was important to the old thing, and, though his own conscience was clear, he was in some degree mixed up with an attempt to cheat her. 'It's difficult to say. Of course, there's always a risk in property, Lucy. You sold at a good price, and showed a fair profit, so nobody could say you were wrong.'

'But I hear that the shops are worth much more than I got for them.'

'They may be. I honestly don't know. There's a story that Woolworth's is going to build at that end of the town. If that's true, then the value of all the surrounding property will certainly go up, there's no denying that.'

'I shouldn't have sold,' declared the old woman, eyeing him meanly. 'I did so only on your advice, Michael.'

He waved his hand, as though to brush the remark away. 'I told you what I thought. I gave you my opinion. Anyone can be wrong.'

'But you're a member of this syndicate, aren't you?'

'It happens that I am, but I knew nothing about the deal except what you told me. I have a small share in the syndicate, but of course I don't control it, and I hadn't been at the meeting which discussed these shops.'

Olive interposed gently, 'Michael knew nothing about it, dear.'

The old woman, with a hunted look, replied obstinately, 'All I know, Olive, is that I've been persuaded to sell my little property, on which I depend for a living, at considerably less than its proper value.'

'Nobody persuaded you,' contradicted Michael. 'Certainly I didn't.'

Turning to Olive, Lucy said plaintively, 'It wouldn't have happened to me while your father was alive.'

Michael stared sullenly at her. What was the point in saying anything? She had a certain amount of justification; he should have been more suspicious when he knew that Gann was mixed up in it, and inquired more fully before he gave advice. But at the time he had been busy, and really it was not his responsibility what cousin Lucy did. But he was aware of his own easiness. He was also aware that Olive was waiting for him to say something, which he fervently did not want to have to say.

However, she brought him to it. 'Anyway, Michael, Lucy doesn't have to worry any more, does she? You said you would speak to Mr. Gann, and arrange everything.'

He noted semi-consciously how she had to brave herself to bring out the name, as though she were proclaiming something shameful.

'Then everything will be all right, Michael?' asked Lucy eagerly.

'I can't promise. Well, Olive, it's no good frowning at

me, for I can't. It isn't in my power. I'll do what I can, of course.'

'I can't imagine,' said Lucy stiffly, 'that a man like Gann would dare to thwart a person in your position.'

The intonation made clear the point that his position was due, not to his merit, but to the Colwell connexion.

'This was a business transaction,' he said, 'and nothing can compel the purchasers to do anything about it. I can only try to persuade them to.'

'But they will, darling, won't they?' asked Olive anxiously.

'I hope so,' he muttered, rising from the table. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work that I must do this evening. Shall I ask Joan to send your coffee out to the garden?'

'Yes, darling, of course in the garden.'

Having delivered the message to Joan, he went into his study. It was a small but pleasant room looking on to the side garden. With the window open it was comparatively cool, now that the sun had set. He switched on the lamp on the desk, and went over to the bookcase. He would read. It was a long time since he had spent an evening reading. But was there anything on the shelves he wanted to read? He pulled out the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, smiling gently at the book. A school prize. Turning to the flyleaf, he found the record—for English Literature, in the Upper Fifth. He took the volume and sat at his desk, a little ashamed that he could not remember when he had last read a Shakespeare play—certainly not since the war. To open the book gave him a small feeling of virtue; he had half a resolve to begin a régime of reading Shakespeare right through. He had opened the book at "Twelfth Night", and he turned to the beginning of that play, telling himself for a while that this was most

enjoyable, but then finding that his attention had wandered. He was idly opening and shutting the drawers of his desk, glancing down at their disarray, and thinking that he really should tidy them. Neglecting the book, he opened the drawers methodically, glancing at the jumble of papers that had accumulated there. Then, in the small left-hand drawer, he saw his revolver, the Smith and Wesson which he had managed to bring back as a war trophy. He picked up the flannel cloth in which it was wrapped, and unwound it. Ugly-looking thing, with the long snout. He pushed the circular magazine to one side and saw that it was fully loaded. Perhaps it was foolish to keep the thing there at all. But neither of the children ever dared enter his room, much less search his desk. And it gave him a spurious feeling of strength. Suppose a burglar should break in; there was enough of value in the way of silver and such, and the houses of The Grange were obvious targets. He wrapped the revolver once more in its cloth and replaced it in the drawer, feeling as though he were keeping there some fragment of the years when he was a soldier, and not bored. Though that, on reflection, was not true either. Wasn't that the old definition of war—long periods of boredom interspersed with moments of terror? The escape from Dunkirk was, of course, one of the moments of terror. The two others that he chiefly remembered were on the journey out to Egypt, and in the Desert during the advance after Alamein.

The first was the terror of helplessness during a U-boat attack on the troop convoy. The occasion in the Desert came just round the El Agheila corner. He had gone over to an intelligence briefing, some miles from his own position, in a wadi up which he had to walk, since his utility would not take the track. On the way back,

shelling started. His limbs continued to pace automatically towards his vehicle but his mind was contorted with such fear, at each successive whistle and explosion, that he felt certain his eyes would burst. When at last he reached the vehicle he nodded to his driver, who swung back, away from the shelling. But it was only a quarter of an hour later that Michael was physically able to take a cigarette from his case and light it, and it was then that he realized his shirt was drenched with sweat, and that he smelt like an animal.

He was recalled soon afterwards to Cairo, and there he received Olive's cable, which had been chasing him from unit to unit, to tell him that Martha was born. When he looked swiftly for the date, he saw that she was by then a fortnight old; assuming, of course, that all had gone well, and the child lived; and Olive lived. He stared at the cable, then hurried to the post office to send one in reply, asking for more news. After that there was nothing he could do.

It was nearly six in the evening. He took a bath, changed into his gaberdine, and went out to celebrate, wandering from bar to bar. In one, when he was already muzzy with drink, a woman with a stout, powerful frame, swarthy face and black crinkled hair stretching down to her shoulders, came and sat with him. She wore a full skirt and white blouse, as though dressed for a peasant part in a light opera. Her face was heavy and ugly, but she had a good-natured smile, fine teeth. After a time, they left the bar and he hailed a horse-drawn gharri, like a huge invalid chair, with the driver sitting up in front.

'Tell him to go along by the river,' he said. They went over the bridge and along the embankment on the far side, the moon showing through the palm trees.

'I heard today,' he told her abruptly, 'that I have a

daughter. She was born a fortnight ago. The cable has only just reached me.'

'So? I am happy for you. Your wife is in England?'

'Yes.' And he began to tell the woman about Olive, and the life he lived with her, and the son whom he had known for only a short while as an infant, and the baby daughter whom, of course, he had never seen. The woman listened patiently. When at last he fell silent, she asked, 'You want to come to my flat?'

He nodded. She said something to the driver, who turned sharply into a side road, and drew up outside a small modern building. She took Michael to her room. When she took off her clothes she seemed much thinner than when she was dressed; her breasts were ponderous, but her belly flat, and her arms and legs thin. Afterwards, when he gave her three pounds, she said, 'I have had five.' But uncomplainingly, knowing that she was growing old.

It would not have happened, he told himself, if he had not been a little drunk, and upset by the cable about Martha's birth. Even after all these years he could not think of the woman without distaste.

From outside he heard voices. Olive and Lucy Colwell were coming in from the garden; and, looking up, Michael realized that the evening was fading.

'Michael,' came Olive's voice, 'may we come in? Lucy is just going. My dear, you'll ruin your eyes reading in that light.'

She switched on a side lamp. Michael, glancing down at the Shakespeare on the desk before him, saw that it was still open at Twelfth Night, Act One, Scene One, and hoped she would not notice.

Lucy, from the doorway, said, 'Well, good night, Michael.'

'Good night. Nice to have seen you.' She knew very

well that he disliked her, so there was no point in making much pretence.

'And you won't forget my little business, will you, Michael?'

'I won't forget. I'll do my best. But I'm not promising anything for certain, mind.'

'It's terribly worrying for me,' said Lucy plaintively.

Olive interposed, 'We've been talking about it in the garden, Michael. It's not really that Lucy wants the shops back.'

'They've always been an anxiety to me,' agreed Lucy, 'what with the cost of repairs, and then the difficulty of always collecting the rent; Mr. Brown was never on time with his, and more than once I had to warn him.' She sighed. 'Not that I could have turned him out, because of some law the Labour Government brought in. I don't understand these things, but it seems most unfair to people like myself, with nothing else but a little property to live on.'

'I'll do my best,' promised Michael, trying not to show his irritation.

'I know you will, darling,' said his wife. 'Perhaps the syndicate would agree to pay a bit more for the shops. It would be only fair, if they're to be so much more valuable.'

'Look, Olive, the sale is complete. A contract's a contract. We have no legal standing at all.'

'Surely,' interrupted Lucy, 'I have some legal redress if I've been swindled.'

Michael, ignoring her, continued to address Olive. 'All I can do is to try to persuade Gann that it would be in his own best interests to forgo a profit in this instance, so as to keep me sweet. In other words, it depends how successfully I can threaten him.'

'That horrible man,' said Lucy, 'ought not to be allowed to prey on people in the way he does. As for that hussy of a wife of his . . .'

'Damn it, I've told you I'll do what I can.'

'There's no need to shout at me, Michael, or lose your temper.'

Olive diplomatically got her away. When she came back alone, Michael said, 'Sorry I snapped out like that. But the woman irritates me so much.'

'I know, darling. But we're the only family she has. Poor old thing, she's very lonely, and rather pathetic, don't you think?'

Michael said patiently, 'I'll do what I can about her blasted shops. Now, let's forget it, eh?'

She smiled and agreed. 'Time for bed.' She went off to the kitchen to heat her glass of milk, while he bolted the doors and saw that the windows were all fastened, and the anti-burglar thumbscrews inserted into the frames. When he got upstairs she was sitting at her mirror, pinning her hair.

'You bathing?' he asked.

'No. I had one when I changed this evening.'

He undressed and went into the bathroom. While he was waiting for the bath to fill he contemplated his reflection in the mirror; a body with very little hair on it, but fairly muscular and well-shaped. His skin was always that pale white, except for the freckled tan above the collar line of his neck, and on his forearms. He gazed at his face, long and thin, pouches beneath the eyes that gave it a mournful expression, like a dog, he thought ruefully. Then he grinned, and the effect was better: his face livened with a smile, and his teeth were white. But when he glanced down at the reflection of his belly he grimaced; that mis-shapen sign of years. He turned away

and got into the bath, lying back to soak. He was still angry at Lucy Colwell's reference to Dorothy—that hussy of a wife of Gann's, she had said, damn her spinsterish tongue.

When he returned to the bedroom, Olive was already in her bed, the pink nightdress frilly about her shoulders, the hump of her belly raising the eiderdown into a mound. He dutifully kissed her good night, trying not to feel repelled. As he lay there in the dark, listening to her moving uncomfortably in her bed in an effort to settle, his thoughts returned to Dorothy, and to Lucy Colwell's words. That Dorothy should be the target of gossip by leathery old maids of the town! Not that there had ever been any gossip which linked her and himself; they had been careful of that. Gann himself must have suspected something, though Michael was never sure how much he knew. Michael had told Olive, after a time, on the occasion when the big row blew up. But those two, he was sure, were the only people to have any idea of what had happened. They had been clever and discreet—and, probably, lucky too. Though it seemed to him that Gann had almost found out, and had perhaps guessed, before it started at all.

It was shortly after his first visit to Gann's shop to get the whisky. He had asked Olive to phone Dorothy Gann and ask them up to tea on a Sunday. 'They're new to the town, and it would be a kindness.' The afternoon had gone reasonably well. It was clear to Michael at once that Olive took a dislike to Gann, and was startled by Dorothy, who had dressed herself up in a tight-fitting suit, nylons with black heels, and a lot of costume jewellery. But Olive set herself out to be pleasant to the guests, though afterwards when Michael tackled her, she admitted, 'Well, I don't want to be uncharitable, darling, but I don't think

they're quite our sort. She's a pretty girl, though.' It was Lucy Colwell, who was also there to tea, who had so clearly drawn aside her skirts, and Michael, seeing that Mrs. Gann noticed it, deliberately interposed to talk pleasantly to her, with his back towards Lucy. And Gann's wife gave him a very slight, soft look of gratitude. When they left, Gann too was grateful. 'My wife has been so pleased to meet you,' he told Olive earnestly, and to Michael he added, 'I've just got my month's allocation, Mr. Padwick, so if you should be running a bit short, just look in, any evening, and I'd be delighted to let you have some.'

A few days later, when he left the office, he turned his car again towards Gann's quarter of the town. A telephone call had delayed him and he was later than on the previous occasion, so that when he pulled up on the corner outside Gann's shop, he saw that it was shut. Glancing up, he noticed a light in the front window of the upper floor. After a moment of hesitation he got out of the car and rang the bell at the side door. For a while nothing happened and he was about to turn away when the light came on in the passage behind the door. When it was opened, Dorothy Gann stood there. 'Oh, it's you.'

'I meant to get here before the shop shut, but I was delayed. Then, when I saw the light upstairs . . .'

'Gann's out,' she said. He was later to find that she always referred to her husband by his surname.

'Oh well, it doesn't matter at all. I'll call back some other evening. It was just that he said he had some more whisky he could let me have.'

• 'Why don't you come in? He won't be long.'

She stood back to let him by, as though the thing were settled. 'He'll be back soon,' she said. When she had

closed the outer door, she led the way along the passage and up the stairs, Michael embarrassed once again, as he followed her, by the movements of her body. The bedroom door, however, was closed on this occasion. The front room was already curtained and the radio playing. Dorothy Gann walked across and turned it off.

'I'm interrupting some programme you wanted to hear,' he protested.

She laughed. 'Children's Hour. I was only listening because I'd nothing else to do. Drink? Gann'd be angry if I didn't ask you.'

She made no womanly pretence of asking him, as a man, to pour out the whisky. This was something which she was quite accustomed to doing herself. Though for herself she poured a glass of orangeade. As she brought him over his glass, she remarked, 'The radio's something to listen to when you're bored. Gann bought it to keep me amused while he was away.'

'Surely he isn't often away.'

'He's usually out evenings.'

'Foolish man,' said Michael, smiling.

She sat down in the chair opposite him, regarding him directly. 'He has business to do. He means to get on. And he will. You don't know Gann.'

'If I were he,' said Michael facetiously, 'I wouldn't leave a woman like you to listen to the wireless all the evening.'

'Oh, Gann's not at all sentimental,' she answered seriously. 'He doesn't want to spend his time making eyes at me.'

Michael, in his embarrassment, smiled nervously. He searched for something to say, and came out with, 'Olive liked you.'

'Did she? I liked her. She's a kind person.'

'Yes, she is.'

'But you don't get on with her very well, do you?'

'Why on earth should you say that?'

'Women always know.'

'Oh well, you're wrong,' protested Michael, but feebly.

The woman regarded him gravely. 'Gann and I don't get on well together, either.'

'Sorry to hear that,' Michael mumbled, wondering desperately how he could get away from this.

'He's a hard person,' she said. 'For him, I'm just a woman to go to bed with when he wants, and an assistant to help serve in the shop. He doesn't really care about me at all. I suppose you wonder why I stay with him.'

Michael murmured that it was none of his business.

'Of course it's not. But aren't you interested in other people's business? I don't leave him for two reasons. One is that I've no money and nowhere else to go. Your wife was born here, wasn't she? She belongs to the town. And she's got plenty of money of her own.'

'Yes, some.'

'She's lucky. I don't know where I was born, and I've never seen my mother that I can remember. Grew up in a kids' home in Manchester. Gann picked me up by the Liverpool docks. I'll never know why he married me. But I've no money, and nowhere to go—except back to the docks. And that's one reason I stay with him. The other is, I'm scared of him.'

'Of Mr. Gann?'

She got up to take his glass to refill, and said, 'Let's not talk about it.'

He rose as she returned with another glass of whisky. Before he took it from her hand, she stood facing him, looking up at him.

'You don't know how I envy your wife. And you too. You've got that fine house, and you've always been used to that sort of life. . . .'

Michael laughed. 'She has. But I haven't. Do you know where I grew up? In Digby Road.'

'Down this end of the town, you mean? How did you get out of it?'

'I got a scholarship to the grammar school, and then my fortunes improved. People do get on, you know. Things don't just stand still.'

She nodded. 'Like Gann will. As I told you.' She was staring at him with more interest now. 'So you're not the high and mighty, or you weren't born to it.'

Michael laughed. 'I hope I haven't grown into it either.'

'No, I don't think you have,' she said slowly. 'But you're softer than Gann.'

'Am I?' It seemed quite natural to reach down and take hold of her free hand, and she did not loose it. She was so close to him now that the scent she was wearing was in his nostrils; too cheap, too sweet, a sort of flower scent. Her eyes widened as he bent to kiss her, and then half shut.

'Your wife wouldn't like that,' she said, not moving away from him.

He was too absorbed with the emotion within him to speak. A sense of delight, not even tinged as yet with guilt, at the prospect of excitement opening up before him. A tremor of physical joy at the touch of her body against his. A feeling of wonder that she should submit to him, that such an exquisite woman should be for him. He bent his head to kiss her again, and this time she made more of a response, slightly moving her hip against his, slackening the compression of her lips.

Then suddenly she broke away and, when he moved forward in protest, quietened him with an upraised hand. 'Hush.' She listened for a moment, then leaned forward, pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and swiftly wiped away the lipstick from around his mouth. 'Gann,' she whispered, 'I can hear him downstairs.'

Michael could too, then. A door shut, and there were footsteps in the corridor. He was agape, but she cool enough. With a little shove she gestured to him to sit down again, and gave him the fresh glass of whisky which, he now realized, she had been holding all the time in her right hand.

'Drink some,' she said, and he obeyed with a gulp. Now the stairs were creaking.

Desperately he demanded, 'How can I see you again? I must.'

'I'll telephone you at your office.'

She was back in her own chair, with the orangeade in her hand, as the door opened and Gann came in.

He smiled with pleasure when he saw Michael. 'Why, it's Mr. Padwick. How nice of you to look in.'

'You said you had another allocation of whisky.'

'Of course. Ah, I see Dorothy has given you a drink. Good, good. Just one moment and I'll join you.'

He went to the sideboard to find himself a glass. Michael felt desperate, looking round this room with its glaring furniture and its air of bareness, but scarcely daring to glance across at the other chair, where she sat with unconcern. Or was she being too cool? He thought that Gann directed one quick flicker of inquiry at her. But perhaps that was his imagination.

Gann now came and sat down on an upright chair between them, smiling quietly once more over his glass. 'We did enjoy our visit to your house, Mr. Padwick.'

'I'm glad. We enjoyed having you.'

'And your wife—what a charming lady! How lucky you are.'

Michael, pulling himself together, now looked rather carefully towards Gann. Was he hinting? But no, he couldn't be. So Michael laughed gently, and replied, 'I could very well say the same to you, Mr. Gann.'

Without turning towards Dorothy, Gann said, 'And I would agree with you. Dorothy, Mr. Padwick's flattering you.'

She said nothing. He seemed not to find this remarkable. Saying nothing was, perhaps, one of the things she did well, and he was accustomed to it.

'By the way, Mr. Padwick, I'm glad for a particular reason that you're here tonight. I wonder if you'd give me some advice.'

'Of course, if I can.'

'Well, this evening I met a most interesting man, name of Poulter, a property dealer who lives over at Brighton. Have you heard of him?'

'I think I've met the name.' Michael could not remember exactly in what context he knew of the man, but had a vague memory that it was to do with an instance of sharp practice.

'He's part of a syndicate, seemingly,' Gann went on. 'And they're interested in a little deal in this town. They want me to go in with them. But, of course, I haven't the resources.'

'Money can always be found,' suggested Michael, since something of this kind was clearly expected of him.

'That's where I'd value your advice, Mr. Padwick. I know you're a most successful business man—oh yes, that's common knowledge. I'd be most grateful if you'd look at this scheme that has been put up to me, and give

me a few tips on whether it's worth going into, and how to set about it.'

Michael said that he would be glad to. 'Why not drop into my office one morning, and we'll talk about it then.'

'Much better,' agreed Gann. 'We won't mix business with pleasure, eh?'

He took a smiling glance at his wife.

'Now then,' he said, 'what about another drink?'

Michael had never been able to make up his mind—and still could not as he lay in his bed in the darkness, listening to Olive's slight uneasy movements in the adjoining bed—whether Gann had sensed, the moment he came into that room, what had happened. There was, perhaps, an atmosphere, an awkwardness, that could have told him.

The thought soon faded. What came back into his mind was the last glimpse he had of Dorothy that evening, as Gann had at last showed him out with the bottles of whisky under his arm. He had turned to say good night to her over her husband's shoulder. She was sitting in harsh lamplight in that ugly room, and he had thought she was the most desirable, most exquisitely lovely woman he had ever seen in his life. And perhaps he still thought so, though he would never willingly see her again; not now that he had promised. He lay on his back in the darkness, desolate. Olive's breathing indicated that she had dropped into a light sleep.

3

IN the morning the alarm clock rang at seven thirty. The sun was promising another hot day. Michael looked

across at Olive and saw that she was propped up in bed and had probably been awake for some time. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning, darling.'

'Lovely one.' He lay there lazily with just a sheet over him, savouring the cool. Outside he could hear the children scampering. 'Suppose I must get up,' he said, 'or that girl'll be in with the breakfast.' So he rolled out of bed, scratched his head, smiled at Olive and made off for the bathroom.

By the time he had shaved and bathed and got back to the bedroom, the breakfast tray was already there, lodged on the table beside Olive, and she pouring out the tea. He sipped at his cup while he got into his clothes, then settled on the edge of his bed for his plate of cereal. 'Let's see. We're drinking with the Thurgoods this morning, aren't we?'

It was the routine for a Saturday morning. The men who commuted to London throughout the week were at home on Saturdays, and they visited each other's houses, in turn, for drinks before lunch. This was a circle to which the Padwicks were only barely admitted; and not on his account. The commuters were rich, or at any rate maintained a show of being rich. And either they or their wives were county. Harold Thurgood, for example, was the seventh baronet, and had a position in a merchant bank. Jim Blanco-Posnett, who had been host the previous Saturday, was a barrister in his middle years wondering whether he dare take silk, and his wife some sort of a connexion of an Irish peer. Most of them did not live in the town itself, but in the larger houses scattered across the countryside beneath the downs, from which they drove the few miles to the main-line station in elderly Bentleys or newish Humbers; all except Tony Green, the

publisher, who travelled each morning on a motor scooter, and was laughingly thought to be a bit of a socialist. These people, though infinitely affable and democratic, did not happen to mix very much with the local businessmen. The Padwicks were included because of Olive—partly because she was so liked, and partly because of her work at the church. It was old Lady Thurgood, for instance—Harold's widowed mother, now lodging in a cottage on the far side of his paddock—who was so ardent a worshipper at St. Clement's, and so particular a friend of Olive's.

'I'll be ready just before twelve, darling,' Olive said, 'if you can manage it. I don't want the children to be kept waiting for their lunch, with the gymkhana this afternoon.'

'Oh, I'd forgotten that. All right, I'll be here promptly,' He dutifully kissed her, went downstairs and looked into the playroom to say good morning to the children.

On a Saturday morning there was even less to do at the office than usual. But he still had to try to fix something with Gann. So when he had read his post and done one or two routine things, he put through a call to the shop, once again fearful that it might be Dorothy's voice at the other end of the phone. But it was his: 'Gann's Stores.'

'Hallo. Michael Padwick here.'

'Why, hallo, Mr. Padwick. I never thanked you properly for that lunch yesterday. Most enjoyable.'

'Afraid it was boring for you—you probably knew more about the subject than the speaker did.'

Gann chuckled at the other end of the phone. 'I must admit my travels did take me to South America a couple of times.'

'What a knowledgeable chap you are, George. However, I wasn't ringing you up just for the chat. I told you

that Miss Colwell was likely to be upset when the rumour got around to her that the shops might be worth more than she got for them. Well, it has, and she is.'

'We don't know, of course, how true the rumour may be.'

'No, of course we don't. All the same, George, I'm in the dickens of a fix about it. Olive thinks I ought to do something, and she keeps on at me. Not that I mind that, but now that she's a bit wrought up anyway, with the new baby on its way . . .'

'Ah, women are difficult then.'

'The fact is, George, I'm going to have to insist on cancelling that deal. Oh, I know there's no legal position at all. But I'm putting it to you as a personal request.'

There was silence for a while at the far end of the phone, and then Gann's voice, slowly and smoothly, 'You make it difficult for me, Mr. Padwick. After all, I don't control the syndicate any more than you do. If it was just me, and you put it as a personal request, of course I'd agree. What else? But how about the syndicate, Mr. Padwick?'

'We shall have to persuade them. We could, if we acted together, couldn't we? I can't over-emphasize, George, that I'm dead serious about this. It's a question of Olive's peace of mind, and perhaps her health.'

'Tell you what,' suggested Gann. 'I've got to go over to the syndicate offices, at Brighton, Monday morning. Say you come over and join me.'

'Fine. What time?'

'Well, I'm due at the offices at eleven-thirty. But I reckon you and I ought to have a small talk about it first, Mr. Padwick. It'll be an awkward thing to handle, and I'd like to discuss it with you from every angle. Suppose we met at ten-thirty, say, at the Cricketers.'

'All right, I'll be there.'

'And, Mr. Padwick, I think we both ought to recognize that it's not going to be a cheap business, this. It'll cost a bit.'

'We'll talk about that on Monday, George. I shan't object to anything within reason.'

Michael replaced the phone, staring thoughtfully at it. How much, then, would it cost? He had to know whether the Woolworth rumour was true or not. He picked up the phone again and told his girl to get him Horsfall, the solicitor.

'Oh, hallo, Horsfall. Michael Padwick here. How're things?'

'So-so. And with you?'

'Just managing to scrape a living. By the way, I want some information, and I wondered if you'd happen to know, as between friends. There's a tale going round that Woolworth's are going to build at the bottom end of the High Street. Anything in it, do you know?'

He thought that Horsfall hesitated rather a long time before he replied. Then he said, 'Surely you don't have to ask me about that.'

'Why not?'

'Oh well, I may be wrong. But I thought you'd already made your arrangements, with that friend of yours you brought to Rotary yesterday.'

'With George Gann? Oh, we're friends, but we don't do much business together.'

After a pause, Horsfall said, 'I'm glad to hear that, frankly.'

'Why?'

Horsfall laughed. 'Nothing I'd want to talk about on the telephone, old chap. Let's just say that it's possible to sail a bit close to the wind.'

'Over this thing, do you mean?'

'Well, no one knows officially yet what the council has decided about the application.'

'Oh, that's the way of it, is it? In that case, I'm not interested. Many thanks, all the same, for letting me know.'

'Not a bit of it, old chap. And if I were you I'd steer clear of a certain gentleman, because some people are going to get their fingers burned. I'll say no more.'

'I'm grateful.'

'Well, a nod's as good as a wink. And your late father-in-law did me a couple of good turns in his time, and I don't forget. Just between you and me and the gatepost.'

'Sure,' said Michael in ringing off, 'and thanks again.'

So it was as he thought. Gann had acted on a tip-off, obviously the application would be granted, and cousin Lucy Colwell had been done in the eye for possibly as much as £10,000. He could, of course, get the shops back by making up that sum, but he had no intention of doing anything of the kind. The most he would do would be to square Gann with the thousand he himself expected to make. But he would have to be hard pressed to go anything like as far even as that.

He looked at his watch and saw that he would soon have to leave. He called in his letters, signed them, and told the girl, 'There won't be anything else, I don't suppose. If there is, it must wait until Monday afternoon—I won't be in in the morning; have to go to a meeting at Brighton.'

'Okay,' she said. Her casual manner irritated Michael as much as her sloppy clothes and ragged hair style. But girls with both shorthand and typing were hard to come by.

He stopped in the yard to speak to the foreman, then

drove home through the stupefying midday heat. There had been no such hot spell for several summers; even the greenness of the downs that framed the scene of houses as he drove up High Street was tinged with yellow.

Olive was waiting for him. She wore a cotton maternity smock that did not succeed in hiding her figure; a wide-brimmed hat of coarse-woven straw ornamented with small straw flowers; sandals. She was standing by the front door in the shade of the porch as he drove up. He jumped from the car and went to her. 'You shouldn't stand about, you know.'

'Oh, I've just this moment come out. I want to be there promptly, so that we can get back in time for an early lunch; the children will have to change into their riding things and be away by a quarter to two.'

'Don't worry. I'll get them there.' She always fussed about the time that the children ate their meals, and such trivialities. But then, he told himself, such things matter to women, and he helped her into the car.

'Pouf,' she said breathlessly, 'it's hot.'

'Let's hope that Harry has lashings of gin, and gallons of lime, and buckets of ice.'

'The lime and ice for me,' she said, 'but not gin, I'm afraid.'

'Poor old thing,' he sympathized. 'What a hell of a thing it is for women to have babies.' But they both well knew that, in any case, she did not much care for any sort of alcohol.

The Thurgoods' house, mostly Queen Anne but with one Victorian wing, lay well back from the road, at the end of a white drive reached through tall wrought-iron gates. Most of the land behind had been sold off as farms long ago, and all Sir Harold had left was a paddock and a small wood.

With a trained local glance at the cars standing in front of the house, Michael said, 'The vicar's here. And the Blanco-Posnetts, and the Brierleys.'

'And Tony,' she added, pointing to the motor scooter propped against the fence.

As he helped her out, another car came up the drive, disgorging Freda and Henry Parraway (he was some sort of merchant—spices, Michael seemed to recall) and their giant son Hilary, down for the vacation from Magdalen. Freda Parraway, a thin, red-headed matron, greeted Olive with a kiss. 'Darling, how brave of you to come. And how well you're looking. Is all going to rule? Oh, but of course, it's your third, isn't it? I only managed to squeeze out one, little Hilary. There, look, I've made the poor child blush. Henry, don't you think Olive looks well?'

'Well, and charming,' he replied gravely. He was one of those heavy, sedate men who are incapable of impertinence. His son seemed incapable of speech.

Freda Parraway led them all round to the back of the house, where everybody was gathered on a terrace looking into a walled garden. Thurgood, their host, a huge man with a huge moustache, was stirring a glass jar of dry martinis. His wife, Grace, reclined in a swing seat with Tony Green, the publisher who, with his motor scooter, his socialist leanings and his wit, was allowed licence of speech, and expected to flirt.

Thurgood came forward to greet them. 'Hallo, Freda. Ah, there you are, Henry, how this boy of yours grows. Olive, my dear, you're very kind to have come. Mother, here's Olive.' The old Lady Thurgood was sitting towards the end of the terrace, with some sewing on her knee. 'Come and sit by Mother.'

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'come and sit by me.' Thurgood drew up a wicker chair and was solicitous with cushions.

'Now, stop fussing, Harold. Olive's a sensible young woman who's going to have an ordinary baby, and the worst thing for her is to loll about on soft cushions. You go back to your drinks.'

'But what can I bring you?' he asked Olive.

'Oh, something cool and long—and strictly non-alcoholic, I'm afraid.'

'Of course. Lime?' And he went off to get it.

Michael found himself beside the Rev. Potts—Father Potts as he would dearly love to be called, but rarely was, except by the girls in his Bible Class. Peter Brierley came over. He was the richest there; could probably, if pressed, raise a quarter of a million—Lloyd's. He was tall, prematurely white-haired, looked like an actor. His wife Betty, chatting to Freda Parraway, had long ago given up the struggle and gone happily to fat.

'Good morning, young feller,' said Brierley. 'Glad I've run across you. I was talking to a chap the other day who said he knew you. Name of Grimshaw. Mark Grimshaw. Know him?'

'Barely,' said Michael. Grimshaw was one of the syndicate, at the London end. The syndicate, Michael had gathered from Gann, was a fleabite to Mark Grimshaw, who dealt in the really big stuff. Michael had met him only twice, and then briefly.

'I'd keep it that way,' said Brierley, smiling.

'Not a good man to do business with?' asked Michael.

'Not unless you've got asbestos skin. He got hold of a young friend of mine over some flats in Knightsbridge the other day. Cleaned him right out, in a couple of months, as easy as kiss your arse. I thought I'd just mention it, since he spoke of you.'

'Damn good of you,' said Michael. 'But it's all right. I haven't got the sort of money he's interested in.'

'Who has, these hard times?' agreed Brierley, passing on. 'Bloody surtax, eh?'

Thurgood realized after a while that Michael had nothing to drink. 'Hell's bells, man, why didn't you shout? What'll it be? Martini, or a long one?'

'Long, if it's handy. So hot.'

'No trouble at all. And how about you, padre?'

The Rev. Potts was on sherry. He shook his head. 'No thank you, Harold. I've had two.'

Along the terrace the conversation changed and shuffled, party by party. Thurgood roamed from one to the other, his mighty voice declaring now upon the quality of weaners at the last market, now upon a round of golf he had played with Brierley, now upon the failings of the working class—'Oh, you would beg to differ, Tony, everyone knows you're a bloody Red, old chap.' What held Michael's attention, however, was the small group at the end of the terrace; old Lady Thurgood seated so serenely, sewing, and Olive at her side, decorous, happy. This was the sort of occasion, and these the sort of people, she loved. And they loved her, or at the least respected her. Grace Thurgood got up from her seat with Tony Green to go over to talk with her, and Potts went to join them. Old Lady Thurgood was gazing contentedly at her protégée, as Olive in fact was. And yet in her cotton maternity smock, in the shade of her broad straw hat, she was as calm and dignified and serene as any of them, and as much in her rightful place.

Somebody began to talk of the gymkhana that afternoon. Oh yes, of course Olive would be going. 'Anthony is riding in the under-thirteens,' she said. 'And I'm sure he'll tumble. And Martha's on the school's fattest pony, in the infants. And she won't tumble. She intends to be the horsewoman of the family.'

'Keep her at it,' advised Thurgood. 'There's nothing in the world like it. I know no greater pleasure than to get my leg across a horse.'

Michael, who had drawn nearer, kept silent. He did not ride. He had not, as a child, had the opportunity; and now, of course, while he could learn to stay in a saddle, he could never hope to ride in the sense that these people spoke of it.

Catching sight of him through the group, Olive smiled and prepared to rise. 'It's frightfully rude, but we shall have to go. I must get the kids their lunch, and then Michael has to drive them down to the field. Grace, thank you so much, it has been lovely. And thank you, dear.' She turned to the old lady and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

'Must you go?' asked Thurgood, helping to marshal them, solicitous for Olive, seeing her into the car. Michael got in, and waved, and drove off down the drive. Olive took her handkerchief from her bag and dabbed the little runs of sweat from her upper lip. 'Oh dear, it's so hot. How I'm going to get through this afternoon . . .'

'Would you rather skip it?'

'Oh, I couldn't, darling. The children would be heart-broken. I'll take a parasol. Were you very bored? I know you don't like these parties. But I do, Michael. I'm shameless about it. I'm absolutely snob, darling. I love my Saturday mornings.'

When they got back, Joan had a cold lunch on the table, and the children were already in their jodhpurs and riding jackets. Anthony sported a yellow tie ornamented with foxes' heads, but he nevertheless appeared lugubrious; he did not much enjoy riding. But Martha, who was getting so fat that she bulged into her clothes, was going about with an air of solemnity, as of one taking

part in a mystery. Michael smiled and gave her a kiss. 'Even if you don't win, you'll have had fun.'

'I shall win,' she solemnly replied.

Usually she chattered throughout lunch; but not today. Anthony was talking more than she was—to keep up his courage, probably, Michael thought. Joan, too, was more cheerful than usual, for it was her half-day, and when she had finished with the lunch, she could get right away from them all. Directly they finished eating, she was already clearing.

'Now then, you two,' said Michael to the children, 'run up and wash your hands and all that, and I'll take you off. Olive, why don't you lie down for half an hour?'

She said that she thought she would. When the children came downstairs again, she kissed them and wished them luck and went off to her bedroom. Michael drove them to the riding-school from which, under Miss Fairweather's charge, they would ride their ponies to the gymkhana field on the outskirts of the town, down by the river. The riding-school yard was littered with children and ponies, with Miss Fairweather, a leathery woman of middle age, striving wanly from the centre to establish order. Michael emptied his two out of the car at the gate and watched Martha running for the stable where a groom was holding her fat pony; Anthony went listlessly.

Olive and he had not to be at the field until half past two, and it was only five minutes' drive away, so he left her resting as long as he could. She looked somewhat refreshed when she came down, though her eyes were underlined heavily. She had changed her smock and put on shoes and stockings, but she still wore the straw hat and she carried a flowered parasol that had once belonged to her mother.

He begged her, 'Now, do be careful not to tire yourself

this afternoon. There'll be crowds of people there. Sit in the car as much as you can—I'll get it up to the ropes. One of the committee is keeping a place for me.'

'I shall be all right, Michael,' she protested. 'This isn't my first baby.'

The field was certainly crowded. Along the far side ran the refreshment marquees, bedecked with drooping flags. The arena for the jumping and other feats of horsemanship had been roped off, and outside the ropes were jumbled cars and people, parties picnicking on the grass, dogs and children chasing each other; mostly townsfolk but some farmers in their tweeds, leaning on sticks. At the furthest end of the field were corralled the horses and the riders splendid in velvet caps and bowler hats, carrying whips and busily adjusting saddles. Most of them were young girls.

The committee-man had not forgotten Michael's request and one of the stewards piloted the car across the field, Michael driving as evenly as he could through the ruts and steering it into the space that had been reserved by the ropes. It was very hot in the field, hotter it seemed than outside it, perhaps because of the steep slope of Verney Down that rose to one side and seemed to press upon it. Olive made little cries of mock dismay at the heat, and Michael lowered all the windows, but there was no breeze to blow through.

'Will you be all right?'

'I'll stand it until the children have done their pieces, then I think I shall have to go home.'

He had brought iced water in a Thermos, and he gave her some of that, after which she felt better.

The next item was a team race in which Anthony was taking part. As the only boy in a team of girls, he was obviously angry at being forced to participate in such a

feminine occasion, as though he had been sent to a ballet school. But when the race started, he was caught up in the excitement of it. When his turn came he rode well, gaining on his three opponents, though the two previous members of his team had muffed it so badly that it stood no chance of winning. Michael glanced round at Olive and saw that her gaze was fixed on the boy, almost with adoration. He looked away again, as though he were an intruder.

After he had parked his pony somewhere, Anthony came over to the car.

'Bad luck, son,' said Michael. 'If all your team had ridden as well as you, you'd have walked it.'

He saw Anthony's eyes widen as he mumbled his thanks, and Michael realized suddenly that he relished praise from his father. From his mother, of course, he expected it, and to her he turned a dutiful but dull attention. Michael felt guilty, as though convicted of neglect.

'Anthony,' said Olive, 'it's so hot in here that I've just got to get out. Reach my parasol from the back seat, will you please, dear?'

While the boy did as he was told, Michael helped Olive out. She held the parasol gratefully, enjoying the shade. 'Pouf,' she said. 'I was baking in that oven. It's much better out here. Let's walk around and see what's happening.'

She put her hand on Michael's arm and he led her gently along the field behind the spectators, her son on her other side. Michael suggested she might like a cup of tea, and they made in the direction of the marquee.

And then it happened. Michael had not realized that it might until a moment before, when he saw Gann and Dorothy walking in the field a few yards in front of them, turning into their path. For a moment Michael checked,

then wished he had not. Olive felt the hesitation and looked round, a little puzzled, for the cause. As she did so, Gann saw them, pulled Dorothy round after him, and cried, 'Why, Mrs. Padwick, how nice to see you. And Mr. Padwick. Dorothy, here are Mr. and Mrs. Padwick.'

For all the embarrassment of the moment, at first Michael could see only the beauty of her. Nothing mattered to him but that. He knew instantly, and for the first time fully, how dreary his life had been since they had resolved not to meet, not even to see each other again, much less to touch. But there was always, of course, chance, accident; as now. She had on a cheap cotton dress of a staring shade of pink—always she dressed so badly, uncaringly—but it could not conceal the loveliness of her body.

Gann came up to them, affable and smiling. 'It seems a long time since we've met, don't it? Dorothy was saying only the other day. . . . Oh, and here's young Master Padwick. We saw you in your riding race, young man. Very well you did in it, too. And I've seen some riding in my time, including real rodeos in California.'

'Did you ride in them?' asked Anthony.

Gann laughed. 'Not I. I'm a sailor. Sailors never could ride horses, that's well known.'

'Good afternoon, George,' Michael now managed. 'And Mrs. Gann—I hope you're well.'

She bobbed her head slightly, but said nothing.

'Are you enjoying the gymkhana, George?'

'Oh yes, indeed. It's good to see all one's neighbours out enjoying themselves. And the children too, so neat and smart they look in their riding togs. It makes a nice outing, don't you think, Mrs. Padwick?'

'Very pleasant.' She had gone pale, as Michael saw in a quick glance at her. Her lips were thin and her eyes cold.

She was looking at Dorothy, who at first looked away, but then stared boldly back, defiant. Olive added, in a faint voice, 'But the weather is too hot.'

'And there I'd agree with you,' said Gann affably, 'and so would Dorothy. She don't like it hot, do you, love? Never sweats, and you can't take heat if you don't perspire, that I can assure you, and I've been in some heat in my time. Liquid, that's the ticket. We were just going over to the tent for a cup of tea. I don't know whether you'd like to join us?'

'No thank you,' she said. 'You're very kind, but not just at the moment, thank you.'

Michael saw that Anthony was about to protest, and he quickly gestured him into silence.

'Well then, we'll be getting along,' said Gann agreeably. 'We'll be meeting Monday, won't we, Mr. Padwick?'

'I have it all in mind,' said Michael. He had not dared to look again at Dorothy, but now, just before she turned away, he had to. She smiled gently at him—not angry, nor reproving. He had to turn away. He heard Olive make some sort of reply to Gann's amiable adieux. Then he and she were walking side by side, back towards the car. For a moment he wondered whether she might faint, and he tentatively held out his arm, but she ignored it. 'I want to go home,' she said in a low voice.

From the other side, Anthony started to complain about the tea-tent. 'Why aren't we going? I thought we were to have some tea, or an ice-cream. I'm jolly hot, with all that riding.'

Michael hastily pulled some silver from his pocket and gave it to him. 'Go and get yourself what you want. We won't come at the moment, Anthony. Mummy isn't feeling too well in all this sun. We may have left by the time you get back.'

'But Martha'll be riding in the next lot,' he protested. 'Don't you want to see her?'

'Oh yes, of course. Anyway, you cut off and get your ice-cream.'

Olive had walked on a few paces and he now overtook her as she reached the car. She got into it without his help and he quietly shut the door. 'What do you want to do? Go home? Or wait until Martha has done her piece?'

'We'll wait. It's wrong to make the children suffer.'

'There's no need for anyone to suffer,' he ventured, 'except from a self-inflicted wound.'

She turned her head away from him, saying no more.

Fortunately, then, the infants' class came on, and there was Martha on her pony, Patsy—the animal lazy, but the child manœuvring her in a determination to win. Martha on a pony was transfigured from her usual jolly, amiable, small-girl self into a creature of iron hardness and unlimited ambition. Michael turned thankfully to watch her. She was, however, by no means the outstanding attraction. The youngsters in her class had all to be under ten, and Martha only just qualified; there were some mites of five or six, and one so young that a groom held her pony on a leading-rein. When it came to performance, though, Martha caught attention. The child riders were handicapped, largely by their ages. Martha was nearly scratch, but in spite of this was soon contesting the lead. After a while it was clearly between Martha and a much younger child, who scored appreciably from the handicap, but nevertheless rode with experience.

Anthony had returned now from the marquee, with an ice-cream cornet in his fist, and he was leaning on the rope, cheering on his sister.

'Who's the little girl with fair pigtails?' asked Michael.

'Rosemary Pobjohn.'

'Oh, that's a bit unfair.' Colonel Pobjohn was Master of the local hounds, and all his children were held in the saddle before they could walk.

Martha, however, was unperturbed by her rival's edge. The crowd was now leaning forward, taking sides, shouting and laughing to encourage the children. Most people took the side of the smaller child; but this too seemed to have no effect whatever on Martha. The last lap, which would decide, was a sack race. Each child had to gallop the length of the course, dismount, get into a sack, and scramble back to a half-way line, leading her pony. Martha and Rosemary Pobjohn were about level at the sacks and in dismounting. But once they were off their ponies, Martha's superior age told. While the smaller girl struggled and tumbled, Martha was tugging Patsy towards the winning line, leaping strenuously and surely in her sack. As she crossed the line, Michael found himself shouting, 'Good girl. Good girl.' Anthony was hurrahing. Michael glanced back at Olive in the car; she was silent, unsmiling, strained. He groaned within himself, and went back to her.

'I want to go home, please, Michael.'

'We must wait for Martha. She won't be long. I'll go and look for her. Anthony, stay with Mummy.'

He struggled off through the crowd, hoping wildly that he might catch one more glimpse of Dorothy. But he did not.

In the corral he found Martha being congratulated. 'Jolly good, darling,' he said. 'Jolly good. Will you be ready soon? We want to go home.'

'Oh, but Martha has to get her prize,' protested Miss Fairweather.

'Of course. I'll wait here.'

He watched Martha mount again and ride out with the other prizewinners to the centre of the field, where the Lord Lieutenant was handing out the prizes, and his lady fastening rosettes on the horses' harness. Martha got a special cheer from the fickle crowd, for this time she was herself the youngest in the row. Michael smiled warmly. If he looked through all his present life, he was sure of only one thing; Martha was worth it.

She came jogging back to him now, and he helped her down from her pony, taking her hand and leading her back to the car. He expected her to be excited, but she was not. She took the win for granted. It was something she had decided upon in advance.

When they got to the car, Olive greeted the child eagerly, kissing her and praising her fervently for her success. She had perhaps, Michael hoped, overcome the strain of the meeting with the Ganns; but then, when he spoke, she ignored him, tightening her lips, and he knew he was mistaken.

'In the back you go,' he said as heartily as he could to the children. He drove home without speaking further.

Lucy Colwell was at the house. She usually came in to help when the girl had a half day off, and for once Michael was delighted to see her. She had set out tea beneath the apple tree on the lawn. The children ran up to tell her about the gymkhana, and Martha to show her prize—a toy horse, most lifelike, with flowing mane and tail. The children were not particularly fond of Lucy, but they welcomed a fresh audience.

'I hope you didn't overtire yourself,' said Lucy to Olive.

'I'm afraid she did, a little,' said Michael.

Olive sat carefully in the high wicker chair. 'I'm all right,' she said, though her cheeks were milk pale. 'Just

a bit tired. I'll have a cup of tea, Lucy, and then I'll go and lie down for a little, dear, if you don't mind.'

Lucy was fussing then. But Michael tolerated her. She was not such a bad old thing, and she had a thin life. When Olive had had her cup of tea and retired to her bedroom, and Lucy offered to stay on and put the children to bed, he smiled quite warmly at her. 'But there's no need,' he assured her. 'They can manage perfectly well for themselves.'

He piled the things on the tea-tray and carried it into the house, to dump it on the table of the cool kitchen with its blinds drawn. When he returned to the garden, he said to Lucy, 'By the way, about those shops. I think I may be able to manage it.'

The old woman's face lit up with relief and greed. 'Oh, Michael. I knew you wouldn't let me down.'

'Now, don't count too many chickens. I can't be sure. But I hope. I'm going over to see the syndicate people in Brighton on Monday morning. I'll do my best. I really knew nothing of the deal except what you told me, Lucy. I'm very sorry it happened as it did.'

'You mean, the shops are certainly more valuable than what I got for them?'

'I'm not certain, but I think so. But then, leave it to me for a few days, and I'll do all I can.'

'I should never have sold them,' she murmured, half to herself. 'I made a great mistake there.'

After a time she wandered upstairs to see Olive, and Michael was left alone to contemplate his glimpse of Dorothy. The excitement merely to have seen her again was so intense that he actually shuddered. It was no use pretending that he had forgotten one single fact about her, or any moment they had spent together. Ever since the first time he had kissed her on that cold evening in

the ugly room above the shop, just before Gann came in and introduced the subject of the syndicate, the sight of her, or even the sound of her voice, had always roused in him this sudden surge of excitement. He remembered that on the first occasion, indeed, it was the sound of her voice. As she had promised, a couple of days after that first kiss she had telephoned him at his office; he had not really expected that she would, and when his girl came through on the phone to say, 'There's a Mrs. Gann on the line asking for you,' he had a moment of incomprehension. Then he hastily told the girl to put her through, trying to make his voice sound ordinary, or indeed bored.

'Hallo, is that Mrs. Gann?'

'Yes.'

The single word was enough to disturb him. It was not that she had a particularly attractive voice; in fact somewhat harsh, and the scowse accent was revealed more clearly on the telephone. But the sound brought into his eye the whole picture of her, and to his senses' memory the touch of her body.

All he could manage to say was, 'I'm glad you could ring me up.'

'I promised I would.' There was a pause, and she asked, 'Didn't you want me to?'

'Yes, of course I did. I must see you again. How can I? I must.'

'I could meet you on Wednesday,' she said, 'any time after seven.'

Michael could scarcely believe her offer. 'On Wednesday evening? Where?'

'Wherever you say.'

'But how about . . . ?'

'That's all right,' she assured him. 'I'll tell you about that when we meet.'

Now he was excited. 'If you mean it, can you get to the Red Lion at Crocombe? Do you know it?'

'I'm not sure, but I'll find out.'

'You can take the green bus that passes the end of your road. Number 22, I think. Better meet out there than here in town, don't you agree?'

'Sure. I'll get there. What time?'

'It'll take you half an hour by bus. Between half past seven and eight?'

'Okay. Good-bye now.'

And she hung up.

He sat there staring at the telephone, a bit scared now. But why should he be? If she had not been willing, she would never have telephoned him. And she was clearly prepared to keep it a secret, to meet obscurely away from the town, to be discreet. But how was she going to get away from Gann? During the two intervening days, he often asked himself that question. He was uneasy about Gann. Who could tell how he would behave? If, that is, he were ever to know. But Gann gave the impression of always, somehow, knowing.

So preoccupied was he with this questioning that he almost forgot to arrange his own excuse for absence, and had to cook up something rather thin about having to meet a business contact for an evening in Brighton. But Olive did not seem to regard this as suspicious.

'It's lucky it's Wednesday,' she said. 'That's my Guild night. Are you having dinner in Brighton? If so, I won't bother about a meal here at all, but just get myself a snack.' He replied vaguely that he wasn't sure whether he was dining or not, but not to worry about that, he would fix up his own eating arrangements for the evening. He would drive there straight from the office.

As a result he had more than an hour to spare after

leaving the office on the Wednesday evening. He drove off down the Brighton road, which was perhaps a sensible precaution, but soon after he had left the town he turned inland, along a secondary road, and drove aimlessly. After half an hour he pulled up and consulted a map. Crocombe was only about six miles distant, so he stopped at the next village and went into the pub for a whisky. There were only a few villagers there, uninterested in him after a casual glance. He stood by the fire, unbuttoning his overcoat to the warmth, and had two more whiskies before it was time to leave.

The Red Lion at Crocombe was no such tawdry little pub. The brewers who had bought it had furbished it up with some taste, exposing ancient beams, tiling the floors in red—that sort of thing. It was a place to drive out to rather than a local, and even on a dark, cold night such as this, there were several cars parked outside. Michael began to have doubts. Perhaps he had been a fool to suggest a meeting-place which might easily be visited by someone who knew him. He went in, feeling furtive. But of the few people in the saloon he recognized none, and, relieved, he bought himself another whisky, and took a seat by the window, to wait. He had looked up the time of the bus and expected her at a quarter to eight. Shortly before then he heard the bus pull up outside. He waited, tremulous. Nobody came in. He suddenly felt sick at the thought that she might have stood him up. But then the door opened and there she was. She was wearing a dark, heavy, rather shapeless overcoat and a hat pulled down on her head. He half rose from his seat, and she saw him and came across. As she sat down and put her elbows on the table and smiled at him, he was seized with wonder that such an exquisite woman should be for him.

‘Will you know me again?’ she asked.

'Sorry. But you're worth staring at. I can't tell you . . .'
He broke off, grinned and said, 'What'll you drink?'

'Sherry, please.'

'Ah yes,' he said. 'Sweet. I know the ladies' tastes!
Where is Gann? How did you get out?'

'Gone to London on business.'

He went across to the bar, ordering her sherry and a whisky for himself. As he carried them back to the table, he could not prevent a nervous glance round to see if anybody had arrived whom he knew. There was nobody. But she had noticed the glance. 'Do people come out here from the town?'

'A lot in the summer, but it's not very likely on a night like this.'

'Hope not,' she murmured. 'I told you I'm frightened of Gann.'

'Don't worry. There won't be anybody.'

'Just in case, let's drink this and go on somewhere quieter. You got your car here?'

'Of course.'

He sat down beside her, passing over the sherry, and putting his hand on hers where it lay on the oak table. 'You're cold.'

'No, I'm all right. The bus wasn't very full. I'll soon warm up.' She raised her sherry glass. 'Cheers, then.'

He asked, 'What time will Gann be home?'

'Not until the last train, I don't suppose. He's meeting some of these property people he does business with—the ones he was talking about to you. But I don't know. He might get back earlier. I've got to be in by ten, then I can say I've been to the pictures.'

Michael nodded. 'Okay. I'm so thrilled that you have come at all, that I agree to any condition. I've been going crazy about you.'

She hushed him. 'Not here.'

'It's true,' he insisted, lowering his voice. 'I had to see you alone, whatever the risk.'

She asked curiously, 'Do you go out with many girls?'

'None. This is the first time since I married—in this country, at any rate. You do believe this, don't you? This isn't for me, just some sort of pick-up. I've never felt so strongly about anything in my life. Dorothy, you must believe this. I'm not just taking a girl out.'

She regarded him carefully, seeming a little surprised. Then she said, 'Ah well, don't take on too much.'

They finished their drinks, and when he made to get more, she uneasily shook her head. 'There's people coming in here all the time. Let's go somewhere else.'

'All right.'

Outside he discovered that it had started to rain. But in the car it was snug, with the heater turned on and the radio quietly playing; the radio was her idea, when she saw that there was one, and he fiddled it until he got some sort of dance music.

'Wonderful car,' she said, leaning back in luxury. 'I've never been in a car like this before.'

'It's not so wonderful as all that.'

'It is where I come from. You'd better remember that about me. Gann'll spend no money on a car.'

Michael was silent. She recognized the tune on the radio and began to sing the chorus softly to the accompaniment. Then she asked, 'Where are we going?'

'There's a rather pleasant little pub I know where certainly nobody will be tonight except a few locals. All right?'

'If you say so.'

The pub was in fact nearly empty, though a good log fire was burning in the hearth. He put her in the ingle-

nook beside it, with the glow of the flames gently on her face, and asked what she would drink.

'Sherry, please.'

'You know, you'd better drink something else. It's so sickly. Have a whisky.'

'Okay.'

Two men who had been in the room went out and they had it to themselves. There was no sound except the faint murmur of a darts match in the public. He put his arm round her and she brought her lips back to be kissed. 'I'm terribly afraid I'm falling in love with you,' he said.

She laughed. 'You fall too quick.'

He kissed her again, and said, 'Let's go?' She nodded. They got up and went out to the car and he turned it towards home. She asked again for the radio, and he found her some dance music. Then they said little.

The road wound over Verney Down. As they neared the top, he pulled on to a grass common and stopped. He leaned forward and switched off the radio, and there was silence. The only light came dimly from the instrument panel and in that he could just make out the paleness of her face. She reached up, took off her hat, pitched it on to the back seat and put her arms around his neck.

After a little while he said, 'Dorothy, I want to sleep with you.'

'Isn't that why we're doing all this?'

'Not here,' he said, 'not in a car. You're far too wonderful for that. I want you in a bed, the two of us shut away, all to ourselves.'

'But how? You don't mean you want us to go away together?'

After a pause he replied honestly, 'No, I don't mean that. I've a wife and children, and a business, and a life

to lead in this town. I don't intend to give all that up.'

'Of course not,' she said. 'What's the time?'

'A quarter to ten. All right, we'll go soon. But if I can think of a way of our being together, would you sleep with me? I don't mean just once. Perhaps for years, perhaps always.'

She was silent for a while. Then she laughed, and said, 'You're a strange man. Nobody's ever said anything like that to me before. It's been quite different.'

'Would you?'

'I might,' she said, 'You find a way that's possible, then ask me again.'

He kissed her once more, then took her home, letting her out of the car on a dark corner two streets from the shop. He asked, 'How shall I get in touch with you again? You can't ring me at the office, it'd start to look wrong.'

'Ring me at home just after six in the evening. He's nearly always out then. If he's not, you'll have to pretend you want some more whisky.'

'You'll hear soon,' he promised. Then he drove to his own house, putting the car into the garage and dodging quickly into the downstairs cloak-room to make sure that he had no lipstick on his face or powder on his coat. And Olive was in the sitting-room, waiting docilely for him. And he had to make conversation with her despite the excitement that was singing in his mind. He had been making conversation with her ever since, and that was the truth of it—poor Olive, he thought, whose fault it was not, never was. Whose fault, then, was it? Could an impulse so compelling be called a fault? Was it anyone's fault? Could there ever have been a check, deliberately as of will, to the chain of events that had led now to Olive lying upstairs on her bed, pale and wretched, because of

one accidental meeting, contrived by nobody, and certainly inevitable at some time or another.

Lucy Colwell came down to say that Olive did not want any supper, but could she get him something?

'No, thank you. I'll boil myself an egg later on. Don't you wait, Lucy. I'll manage.'

When he had seen her out, he hesitated for a moment in the hall, then mounted the stairs and went into the bedroom. Olive was lying there with the light on and a book on her knees, but she was not reading.

He went over to her, sat by the side of the bed. She turned her head away from him and said nothing.

'Look,' he said, 'isn't this rather silly?' Silence. 'It was inevitable that some time or other we should all meet. This isn't a very big town.'

'I can't stand it,' she murmured in a low voice.

'But be sensible, Olive. That means either that we must move from the town, or we must have the whole thing out with Gann and ask him to move—and I don't know why the hell he should, and heaven knows what it would lead to.'

'Go away and leave me alone.'

'Listen, my dear. We've discussed all this time and again. We agreed that, because of the children, we stay together. Very well then, but you must do your share too.'

'She was so vulgarly dressed,' said Olive suddenly, 'like a little tart. Michael, how could you?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake. There's absolutely no point in going over the whole thing again. Nothing has happened today to make any difference to the situation between us, except that accidental meeting. We were bound to meet them, my dear girl, if we continued to live in the same town. What on earth difference can it make?'

'It reminds me.'

'That's simply childish, and you know it is.'

'I can't help it. Of course I know, but I can't help it. Please go away now.'

He went out of the room and downstairs to his study, where he sat for a long time, doing nothing. He thought of going to boil himself an egg, but decided that he did not want to eat anything. Instead, he poured himself out a strong whisky. After a time he went to walk around the garden. The heat of the day had at last faded, and twilight was coming. Verney Down, towering above the town, looked hard and forbidding in the half-dark, and the chalk-pit scooped from its flank glowed grey. The garden was silent; at this time of year, no bird-song. By the windows was the smell of night-scented stock. Michael paced slowly up and down for a long while. But he could decide nothing, and could put nothing into order. He heard the garden gate open, and it was Joan returning from her half day. She bade him good evening, and he told her that Mrs. Padwick was not feeling very well—the heat had been too much for her at the gymkhana—and she had gone to bed. The girl asked how the children had done, and Michael told her of Martha's success, laughing a little at the recollection. 'She'll always win, that one,' said the girl, going in.

Michael walked for a little longer in the garden. The stars were out now; it was a moonless night. The lights of the town shone below him. At last he went upstairs, opening the bedroom door quietly, not daring to put on the light, but depending on the light from the landing. Whether Olive were asleep he did not know, but if not she was pretending to be. He slipped out of his clothes and got into bed, sighing as he stretched his legs beneath the sheet that was the only covering he could bear. Most

marriages, he supposed, were something like this; an uneasy acceptance of convention, and little more.

When he woke in the morning, Olive was still pretending to be asleep. At any rate, she lay still in her bed and said nothing. He got up and put on his dressing-gown; on a Sunday, he was expected to make the breakfast. He went down to the silent kitchen, drawing aside the chintz to let in the morning sunshine—the weather showed no sign of a break—and putting a kettle on to the hissing gas stove, ranging pieces of bread to toast beneath the grill. Soon he heard the children moving about, and then Martha ran into the kitchen. She liked to help him on Sunday mornings, carrying in the crockery, setting the table. He had put a tray for Olive, and when Joan came in, sleepy, he asked her to take it upstairs to her. He himself went into the playroom and ate his breakfast with the children, grateful for their cheerfulness. He lit a cigarette—a thing he rarely did before lunch—and listened to their chatter, glancing casually now and then at the *Sunday Times*, scattered over the table. When he had smoked the cigarette he went upstairs again. Olive was lying in bed, her face pale and serious.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked, trying to be casual.

‘Not too good. I don’t think I’ll come to church.’

‘I shouldn’t. Have a restful morning. I’ll take the children.’

Without giving her the opportunity to say more, he went into the bathroom to shave and to take his bath. He felt easier now about Olive. She was upset, of course. A good deal of it was, no doubt, due to her pregnancy; her emotions were multiplied. But she would gradually recover from the disturbance. The best thing to do was to say nothing more about it, but simply to wait until she felt calmer. When he came out of the bathroom, he

called down to Joan to see that the children were made ready for church. Then he went into the bedroom to dress. Olive looked as pale and distraught as before.

'Why don't you spend the day in bed?' he suggested. 'It would do no harm.'

'No, I'll be up for lunch. Perhaps I ought to come to church.'

'You're far better resting. Anyway, it's too late now. We must go in a few minutes.'

'I'll go to evensong,' she said.

'Yes, why not do that? We'll have supper late.'

The children were waiting when he got downstairs. St. Clement's was too near to make it worth while getting out the car, so they walked down the road, Anthony striding in front, Martha holding her father's hand. From several directions their friends and neighbours were converging on the churchyard gate. One woman inquired after Olive, and he told her that she was not feeling too well—'the baby coming, you know.'

'Ah yes, of course. Give her my love, the dear thing.'

Michael took the children to their allotted pew; in St. Clement's one paid for one's seat. He knelt in perfunctory fashion, but there was nothing much that he felt able to pray about. He came to church in deference to Olive—perhaps in deference to his position in the town. But as for sincerity—that was not something one could command. Once he had thought that his affair with Dorothy was the barrier to his prayers; now that was all over and he had repented, but the barrier remained. He put the question from his mind and got up from his knees, hushing the children who were starting to argue in the pew beside him. Then he gazed round at the various people he knew in the congregation, allowing himself his favourite speculation as to how many of them felt any

sort of religious benefit from their church-going, and how many, like himself, came solely from a sense of rightness, and stayed unmoved.

When the service was over, and they began to stream forth into the sunshine, the Rev. Potts hurried in his cassock with a cord knotted around his waist to greet his congregation at the church door. He too was solicitous about Olive.

'Nothing to worry about,' Michael assured him. 'She was just a little tired—the gymkhana yesterday was too much for her. She's quite all right. When I came out, she was hoping to get to evensong.'

'Ah,' sighed the Rev. Potts, 'what a fine spirit!'

Olive was dressed and downstairs when they reached home and she tried to make conversation about the service, the sermon, the people who had been in church. But clearly she was still taut, still suffering from the strain. Michael understood that it would have to be relieved, there would have to be an outburst. In the afternoon, when Joan had taken the children off to tea with Lucy Colwell, he deliberately brought it on.

He said to her, 'You're going to have to stop this, Olive. You're torturing yourself, and me, over absolutely nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all? Do you call adultery nothing at all?'

With a deprecating gesture he tried to calm her down. 'Now, Olive, all that's long ago. We've had this argument. It's finished.'

'It will never be finished for me.'

'Then you're very foolish. What do you want me to do? What *can* I do?'

'Nothing, now. It's what you have done. Oh, Michael, why did you do it?'

'This is pointless. What has happened, has happened.'

We've been over all this. You agreed to the fresh start. How can you expect us to be happy if you keep on raking up what's past?'

She was walking up and down the room, agitated almost to tears. 'It was seeing her again. In public. I felt that everybody on that field was turning to point at us, and to shout that she'd been your mistress, and I your despised wife.'

'But that's silly. Nobody has the slightest inkling.'

'If they should have,' she said desperately, 'I'd . . . I don't know what I'd do.'

'Now calm yourself, please. Why should anybody know? It's over and done with, try to remember that. It's finished, long ago. There's nothing more to be said.'

'But to be thought, and felt . . .'

'Only if you allow yourself,' he insisted. 'Listen. All this hysteria you're working up—yes, it is hysteria—is because you're pregnant. Let's be clear about all this. It's physical, my dear. In not so long now your baby will be born, and then you'll see everything in proportion again. I do assure you of this.'

He ventured to go near to her, and she put her arms round him and rested her head against his shoulder, starting to sob. He tried to comfort her, and when she spoke again it was more calmly. 'Do you think that man knows?'

'Gann? No, I don't think so.'

'It is the thought of anybody knowing that I can't bear. The humiliation.'

'I'm desperately sorry for what happened,' he said evenly, 'but I can't do anything about it. All I can do, and all that you can do, is to put it firmly into the past, and start living in the present.'

'I know. I know. Forgive me.'

After tea, when she began to make ready for church,

he offered to go with her, and she smiled her thanks. She took his arm as they turned out of the gate into the tree-shaded road. The evening was already cooling. The lights inside St. Clement's shone through the stained glass of the east window. The bell was pealing. Once again there were people converging on the church, though fewer of them. Several came across to speak to Olive, and she began to smile and live again in this esteem. Michael settled her in their pew, and then gave himself up somnolently to the service. Evensong always seemed much less challenging than matins. One could take it quietly, and savour what was perhaps some idea of the peace of religion. Or was it just sleepiness? For his wife it was not; she was devoutly engaged, he knew, in erasing from her conscience the hatred and bitterness in which she had spent the previous twenty-four hours. And she would. At the end of the service they would walk home together to a cold supper, listen perhaps to a little music on the radio. Olive preferred not to use the television on Sundays, a distinction which she confessed she could not rationally explain but which she felt to be good, and go early to bed. He ought to be able to accept such an existence. Perhaps he ought even to be grateful for it. He had money, position, security, a charming family. He supposed that these things would have contented him if he had not chanced to meet the woman he really wanted. Most men, perhaps, never met that woman, and so were content. But he had. And though he had renounced her, contentment was never again to be, for him, possible.

The evening went much as he had imagined it would. After the service they went home to the cold supper. They did not listen to the radio; Olive said she was feeling tired, and would go early to bed. So he sat for an hour with the Sunday newspapers, at which he had

scarcely glanced in the morning, and with which he soon became greatly bored.

Olive went up to the room first, and when he came she was already in bed.

'Oh, by the way,' he told her as he undressed, 'I think I can manage to do something about Lucy's shops.'

'You can? I'm so glad, darling.'

'I'm going over to Brighton for a meeting about them first thing tomorrow morning,' he said. 'I don't suppose I shall be home for lunch.'

As he put out the light, he grimaced to himself. The words which he now spoke genuinely were just those which, so often before, he had used as an excuse to get away.

4

DURING the night there was thunder, but the morning broke clear again, the sun was warm, and the atmosphere fresher for the rain. When he got out of the house, Michael turned the car towards Brighton. He drove slowly, having plenty of time and being in no mood for speed, though there was little traffic at this hour of a Monday morning. He used to take this road fast in the days when she was at the end of the journey.

That had been the solution to the problem of how they were to be alone together. It was quite simple, though he thought for two days before it came to him. At first he thought in terms of some country hotel; but, in a remote district, strangers were noted. Choose, therefore, a crowded place. And, of course, there was Brighton. But

again he decided against any hotel, no matter how unlikely. There was always the risk of recognition by some chance visitor. So he drove over to Brighton and took a furnished room, telling the landlady that he lived in London, and that he and his wife would be using the room only occasionally, as a sea-side place. He paid in advance.

It was not a bad room, though the district was unprepossessing. Being at the top of one of a row of tall, red-brick Victorian houses, it had a sea view over the intervening streets. The furniture was ungainly but comfortable. The gas fire needed new burners; he gave the woman some money to buy them. The rent was three guineas a week. 'Breakfasts extra,' the landlady said with hostility, as though to show that she was not to be put upon even by a gentleman so agreeable to all her terms. Michael said that of course breakfasts would be extra, and they would pay for them as they had them. Then he had a sudden vision of Dorothy alone with him in that room, and he could stand it no longer, but hastened from the house, telling the woman that he and his wife would arrive some time later, he would let her know when.

He drove back fast. It was already nearly six o'clock. He kept glancing at his watch as he drove. At a quarter past six he saw a telephone kiosk and pulled up beside it, putting in the coins and dialling Gann's number. As the ringing tone sounded, he felt himself trembling. He had his cover conversation about whisky so ready on his tongue that he nearly spoke it when the phone clicked, and it was her voice that said, 'Hallo.'

'Dorothy. It's me. Are you alone? Is he out?'

'Yes.'

Michael sighed, blowing out the air from his lips. 'Listen, darling. I want to ask you that question again.'

'You've found a way?'

'Yes. I've taken a room in Brighton. The landlady expects me and my wife to come down occasionally from London.'

There was a pause at the other end of the phone, and then he heard her chuckle.

'It's safe,' he said, 'so far as that goes. I'll take a suitcase over when next I'm in Brighton, and leave some clothes. You can leave some there too, if you like.'

'Hey, aren't you taking something for granted?'

'Am I? I'm hoping.'

'Well, suppose we wanted to, how would we get there? And when?'

'How is easy enough. I could meet you wherever you like, and drive you there. Or we could go separately. When is more difficult. So far as I'm concerned, I can fix up some excuse to go there at any time. It's when for you.'

'Gann's going to London on business again on Thursday. It's early closing. He'll likely be catching the two-fifteen.'

'Darling, where will I meet you?'

'I'll take the bus out to Turnpike,' she said swiftly, as though there might be someone coming at her end. 'You park your car up the lane towards the farm on the right. I'll be there about three o'clock. You're sure it's safe at the other end?'

'Absolutely certain. Darling . . .'

But she interrupted him. 'Good-bye now.' And then she had hung up. Michael drove into the nearest village, stopped at the pub and bought himself a large Scotch. He was committed. He shivered a little. However safe it seemed, there would always be some chance, some risk. But then he remembered the touch of her, drank down his

whisky, and went out again to the car, thinking of nothing but the advent of Thursday.

On that day he made an excuse not to be in to lunch. He had decided to lie as little as possible, so he told Olive that he was called to a meeting in Brighton early in the afternoon, and he might have to go on to dine there, and not be back until late at night. It was surprisingly easy. She made no question of it at all. While she was downstairs getting breakfast he put some clothes into an odd suit-case, and managed to get it down unobserved to the garage, where he put it into the boot of the car, locking it after him. He spent the morning at his office, then drove to a pub outside the town to get a snack for lunch. He wanted to be in the lane for only about five minutes before the bus arrived. That meant he had about half an hour to spare, and in desperation he ordered himself another drink.

At last he felt that he could reasonably go. He took a cross-country route to Turnpike, found the lane, and ran the car about fifty yards up it, pulling into an opening in the verge which led off into a field. Then he waited. A light rain was falling, and the afternoon was dark; all the better, there would be fewer people out. He waited. He glanced at his wrist watch and saw that the bus would not be there for at least three more minutes. He lit a cigarette, and the inside of the car windows started to steam up. Groping beneath the dashboard he found his wash-leather and began to clean them. In that way he missed her approach and first knew she was there when she opened the near-side door of the car; it took him so suddenly that he jumped violently.

'Expecting someone?' she asked, smiling. Then she slid into the seat beside him and shut the door. He started the car. She stretched forward to turn on the radio,

fiddling for some dance music. Then she leaned back and asked, 'Got a cigarette?'

'Gann go off to London all right?'

'Yes. He caught the two-fifteen.'

Impulsively he turned towards her and said, 'Darling, I can't believe it's really true. You look wonderful.'

'Steady on. You'll have us in the ditch.'

That brought him back to reality. Perhaps the biggest danger of all—the exposure they would not be able to dodge—was of being caught in a road accident with Dorothy in his car. Even a slight accident. 'Not another word,' he promised, 'until we get there.'

There was a side turning by the house, and there he parked the car. He took the suit-case from the back, asking, 'Did you bring any clothes?'

'No. I dare not. Gann knows what I have. He might miss them.'

'I'll buy you some,' he promised. 'By the way, here our name is Lewis. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis.'

They went round to the front door. He had been given a key, but it was not locked. Their arrival did not seem to interest the landlady, for nobody came. He motioned to the stairs, following her up with the suit-case. 'Right at the top. It's a bit of a climb.'

There was only their door on the top landing. This one was locked. He put down the suit-case and found the key. He was about to turn the electric light switch, but she checked him and went across to the window, gazing out at the view across the rainy roofs towards the distant greyness of the sea. He closed the door behind him, the lock clicking home. It was cold, and he knelt by the gas fire, holding a match to it. The glow lit the room.

There are a few indelible moments in every man's life. This was one in his. She had drawn the curtains across the

window, and turned to face him. He looked up at her from where he was, on one knee on the floor. The orange glow touched upon her face. She was trying to smile at him, as though she were a little scared. She took one step towards him, uncertainly. Behind her was the shadow of the gaunt, old-fashioned bed. The boldness with which she usually faced life seemed to have faded. She said, 'Well?' in a husky sort of whisper. He got up swiftly from the floor, letting fall the box of matches. He took her hands and said, 'I swear that I love you.' She laughed nervously. She said, 'You're not the first man I've slept with, not by many; but I somehow wish that you were.' Then he put his arms round her and she tilted up her face towards him, and he caught again that expression of innocence that seemed to survive everything that she said and did.

That was the indelible moment. Nothing that happened after—or, for that matter, ever since—remained fixed in his mind with such clarity as to every detail. It was in his mind now, as he drove into Brighton on this summer morning; but to see her husband, to talk the dreary talk of business, not to see Dorothy, never again to see her. For all the brightness of the morning, Michael felt chill. He had been warmer on that afternoon of winter drizzle when he had first taken her with him to the room that was to be the slightly comical setting to their love. Now, for all the sunshine, he shivered.

The town was full of holiday-makers. He came in at the far end and drove along the sea-front. It was the usual bright scene—a few sailing boats dancing on a choppy sea, a speed-boat curving superbly around the West pier, thousands of girls in scanty bathing suits and pale-fleshed young men in trunks, droves of children nibbling at pink lumps of candy-floss on sticks, the police in their

shirt-sleeves and wearing white helmets. The road was jammed with cars, and he had the usual difficulty in finding anywhere to park. But at last he bribed an attendant to find him an odd corner, and he locked the car and walked through the narrow lanes flanked by antique shops until he came to the Cricketers, an old pub still full of mahogany and plate glass in a street running down to the sea front.

Gann was already there, seated in a corner at the far end of the saloon with a pint of shandy on the table before him. 'Good idea,' said Michael as he greeted him, and he ordered himself a shandy too, taking it over to the table, sitting next to Gann. 'Ah,' he said, 'That's good. It's hot, driving.'

'It's hot everywhere,' agreed Gann. 'Nice, if you like it.'

Michael nodded. 'What time's our meeting? Eleven-thirty, isn't it? Afraid I'm a bit late, but I had a job parking the car. Still, we've got three-quarters of an hour. How are we going to tackle them about these shops of Miss Colwell's, George? I suppose, by the way, it's the secretary chap we're meeting, what's his name? Poulter.'

'Not so fast, not so fast, Mr. Padwick. To start with, it won't be only Mr. Poulter. Mr. Mark Grimshaw will be there too.'

'Oh, will he?' Michael did not particularly relish that. Why should Grimshaw turn up to an unimportant meeting of this kind?

'He happened to be in Brighton for the week-end,' explained Gann, 'so he's staying on to clear a few things up.'

'Oh, is that it?' said Michael, still suspicious. 'I shouldn't have thought he'd have bothered himself over a couple of small shops.'

Gann took a swig at his shandy. 'You remember,' he said, 'that we didn't fix this meeting just to talk about Miss Colwell's shops. When you rang me up, I said I was coming to a meeting at the syndicate offices this morning in any case, so you might like to join me. No doubt we can talk about the shops if you want, though I'm not very optimistic. Mr. Grimshaw doesn't like to be disappointed, even in small matters.'

'Then he'll have to lump it this time. I'm serious, George.'

'Why, of course. All the same, how important are these shops to you really, Mr. Padwick, or to Mrs. Padwick either, for that matter?'

'That's my business,' said Michael sharply. 'Look, George, I've told you I'm serious about this. If you don't want to accommodate me, then say so, and I'll go straight home. But that would be the end of our business dealings. I tell you, I'm in earnest.'

Gann made a deprecatory motion with his hand. 'No need to get angry about it, Mr. Padwick. Surely we can discuss things calmly.'

'Only on the basis that I want those shops sold back to Miss Colwell, and I want your support in that.'

'But you haven't heard all of it yet. Why not listen first to all the facts? Then you can decide.'

Michael went over to the bar and ordered two more shandies. He brought them back, sat down again at the table, and said, 'Very well. That's sensible enough. What do you want to tell me that I don't already know?'

'Your very good health, Mr. Padwick,' said Gann, raising his glass and sipping. 'Now then, the first fact is that Mr. Grimshaw wants to step out of the syndicate.'

'Anything wrong?' asked Michael, suddenly cold.

'No, no. Nothing wrong at all. But Mr. Grimshaw's a

big man, and this syndicate is, for him, small beer. I suppose—though he doesn't take me into his confidence, I'm sorry to say—that he wants his capital out to put into a bigger venture. Anyway, he wants to get out, so there's a chance for somebody else to get in.'

'You?' asked Michael.

'Us,' said Gann.

Michael thought for a moment, then said, 'Oh no. No thanks. I'm not playing.'

'Aren't you? It might be very much to your advantage, Mr. Padwick.'

'Sorry, but my money's all tied up elsewhere.'

'It might be worth your while to free it. You know, Mr. Padwick, you've been using some strange words to me these last few days. You've been talking about having to insist on this, and demanding that. Perhaps it's my turn now to do a bit of insisting.'

Michael asked coldly, 'What are you getting at?'

Gann eyed him almost mockingly, and then said, 'Why, Miss Colwell's shops, of course. What else, Mr. Padwick?'

It was not, of course, what he meant. Michael understood that very well. Could he really be hinting that he knew about Dorothy?

He said, 'You mean, I want the shops back, and your price for helping me get them returned is that I shall go in with you?'

'No, not quite, Mr. Padwick,' said Gann slowly. 'Let's forget about those shops for a minute, shall we? Here we have a chance to make our fortunes.'

'Well?'

'For the sum of eighteen thousand pounds we can buy, from Mr. Mark Grimshaw, sufficient shares in the syndicate to hold the controlling interest.'

'You couldn't get control for that amount, or anything like it.'

'Ah,' said Gann, 'I put it badly. You already have a small share, Mr. Padwick. So've I. And from time to time, as I've made a few pounds, I've put them in and bought a bit more. Then I have some small sum in cash, and a few little bits of property I can put in, and I've raised some more from my bank. With all this, I haven't enough. I'm short by eighteen thousand pounds. That's what I meant.'

It was not until then that Michael realized what sort of stake Gann was playing for. If that were his margin, and he already had enough, save that, to buy control of this syndicate, he was attempting a coup that would make him rich for life. There must be something like fifty or sixty thousand pounds in it.

As though he followed what Michael was thinking, Gann said, 'Yes, it's a great chance for me. I'd do anything—anything at all, Mr. Padwick—to make sure of it.'

Michael again shook his head. 'It's kind of you to offer, George, but this one's not for me. To start with, I haven't got eighteen thousand pounds.'

'You could raise it.'

'Yes, I suppose I could. Though not easily. It would mean mortgaging most of what I hold. I just don't feel I can risk it, and that's that. Count me out. You'll raise the money somewhere else.'

Gann gazed thoughtfully into his half-empty glass. 'That's the trouble. I've already touched all the sources I have, except you. I'm not asking a favour. It would be a good investment.'

'I think it would. But I'm not interested just at the moment. What I came over for was to discuss Miss Colwell's shops.'

'Ah,' murmured Gann quietly, 'there we have a difficulty. If I were to sell the shops back to Miss Colwell, and lose the profit I hope to make on them, I should be further than ever from being able to buy control of the syndicate. In fact, Mr. Padwick, I should then need to raise about twenty-eight thousand pounds instead of eighteen.'

Michael put his glass down on the table, and stared at him. 'How do you make that out? A profit of ten thousand on those shops? At the very best and luckiest, that's the total profit that could be made. You can't hold more than a tenth of that, George, and it's no good trying to fool me.'

'I hold it all.'

'What do you mean? The syndicate bought those shops.'

'Not exactly.'

'Are you saying that you bought them as a personal spec?'

'I was, shall we say, a go-between? They'll go to the syndicate in the end.'

'Then all this stuff about being willing to resell them if it were only up to you, but having to persuade the syndicate—that was all eye-wash?'

'In a sort of way, Mr. Padwick, yes.' He was smiling gently, 'After all, in business one has to manœuvre a little.'

'If that's your idea of a business manœuvre, it's not mine. It sounds to me as though you've falsely represented the transaction, not only to me, but to Miss Colwell. I want no more part of this, Gann. I'm now going to ask Miss Colwell exactly what did go on, and if I find any irregularities . . .'

He was starting to rise from his seat, but Gann gestured

him to sit down again, almost pushed him down. 'You won't find any, and you know you won't. Everything's perfectly in order. If the old lady got muddled about where she thought she was selling, well, old ladies do get muddled. There's no muddle in the contracts. Talk sense, Mr. Padwick, please.'

'How you expect me to talk to you at all, I don't know,' said Michael. But he sat down again. 'My God, you've got a nerve, George. I'll say that for you. Do you think after this that I'd trust you with sixpence round the corner?'

'Oh yes, I do.'

'You do? Well, you're mistaken. I shall now wish you a very good morning. I don't think we need have any more to do with each other, either in the way of business or anything else.'

This time he did get up, and Gann made no move to stop him. But, glancing slyly up at him, he said, 'We shall, you know.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'Depends how you look at it,' replied Gann calmly. 'I need someone to invest eighteen thousand pounds with me in this syndicate. If you won't, I think Mrs. Padwick would.'

'Olive? You're mad.'

'She's got the money, I believe. They say her father left her a bit more than that, and I daresay it's improved since his death. She could do worse than put it into the syndicate.'

Michael leaned forward and took Gann by the sleeve of his jacket. 'If you dare!'

Gann shook his arm free. 'And, I think she might when I put all the facts before her.'

Sinking back into the seat behind him, Michael said,

'If you're implying that you think you can blackmail my wife about anything domestic, perhaps you'd like to hear that she already knows all about it.'

'Oh, I'm aware of that. But nobody else knows. And they'd be bound to, Mr. Padwick, if I started divorce proceedings.'

There was silence between them in which Michael could hear with sharp clarity all sorts of incidental noises; a woman laughing at the far end of the room, the clink of a half-crown on the bar, a car passing distantly somewhere outside, and a gull mewling.

He wanted to get up again and walk straight out of the pub, and drive away, anywhere. But he felt that he could not move. He saw that his hand was trembling. He put it into his pocket.

'By what my wife tells me,' said Gann conversationally, 'I expect it'd be an undefended case.'

After a pause, Michael said, 'And yet you ask me to come in as partner with you.'

Gann smiled. 'I need the money. I don't particularly need the woman.'

'But how can we possibly work together if we've been involved in a divorce case? You're out of your mind. I wouldn't any longer be living in the town—it would destroy my whole life.'

Gann said, patiently, 'No, you haven't got it quite right, Mr. Padwick. If you put up the money I need, there won't be any divorce case. If you don't, but Mrs. Padwick does, there still won't be any divorce case. It's only if I don't get the money that there'll be trouble.'

'I won't be blackmailed.'

'I think,' said Gann, 'that you're being very unfair to me. I'm not trying to get you to give me the money. I'm simply asking you to invest it in a very good thing

indeed, which many people would be glad of the chance of doing.'

'Then go to them.'

'I've been to all I know. I haven't the introductions to anybody else. It could be arranged, of course, but it would take too much time. It's this morning that I have to tell Mr. Mark Grimshaw whether or not I'm buying.'

'Then, if you're depending on me, you'd better tell him you're not.'

'I think that would be very unwise of you, Mr. Padwick. And I shan't tell him anything of the kind. I feel sure that either you or Mrs. Padwick, when you've thought it over, will see what a good investment this could be, for all of us.'

Michael stood up. 'You can tell him what you damn well like. That's your affair.'

'Aren't you coming with me to the meeting?'

'I am not. I've nothing more to say.'

Gann shrugged. 'There must be something more to be said on both sides.'

Michael turned his back on him and walked out of the pub. He turned right down the narrow street towards the sea-front. When he had crossed the promenade, he began to wander aimlessly with the thick, happy crowd. He must let the anger die out of him, so that he could assess the thing rationally. There was an empty deck-chair by the railing. He sat in it, putting on a pair of sun-glasses to protect his eyes from the glare of the sea and the beach. The beach was packed with people, most of them in swimming suits, lying about on the shingle, reading, listening to portable radios, tasting from picnic baskets, or prancing down to the water's edge where a wide strip of sand had been uncovered by the lazy sea, to take part

in games of ball, or paddle, or plunge into the sea for a swim. On the road behind him the cars passed ceaselessly to and fro.

The first shock to assimilate, of course, was that Gann knew about him and Dorothy. Not that it was so much of a shock. For a long time Michael had wondered how much the man knew, and from little sentences that he had spoken, almost as asides, had feared it was a good deal. What he had not expected was that Dorothy should have talked to Gann about it. And yet that is what he implied. By what his wife told him, he had said, he expected the case to be undefended. Was it that, exasperated by something that Gann said, she had flown out at him and told him enough for him to guess the rest? No, that was unlikely. Dorothy was afraid of him; she always had been. Had Gann, then, terrified her, perhaps ill-treated her? For a moment the beach and the sea were blotted out from Michael's eyes in a red darkness. But then he controlled his rage—though wondering a little to himself at the strength of it.

Whatever way it had happened, one thing was sure. Gann knew. He had obviously known for some time. Presumably, if he wanted a divorce, he had evidence. He might have been bluffing, but Michael thought he was probably not. After all, he and Dorothy had been together many times. If Gann went looking for evidence, there was small doubt that he would soon find it. The chances were that some quite trivial, unexpected happening had given the thing away to him in any case. That was the way in which such things happened. It was the way, indeed, in which Olive had first learned of the matter. Two shirts and a set of underclothes—that was what had led to it; not directly, of course, but he could see now that those few pieces of clothing had been the

original factor that altered his life. It seemed ridiculous, but it was so.

Two shirts and the underclothes were not, in themselves, the cause. They merely set off a chain of reactions in his own mind. They were the shirts and underclothes that he had taken in an old suit-case to the Brighton room, and left there. Olive missed them. It had never occurred to him that she would. He had so many shirts and pants and vests. It seemed most unlikely that she kept any sort of check on them, except the routine check against the laundry list when any of them returned in the basket. But he had underestimated her methodical housewifery. One morning, when he went up to the bedroom after breakfast to get himself a handkerchief, he found her rummaging about in his wardrobe.

'Michael, it's very odd, but some of your things seem to be missing.'

'Are they?' he asked, unconcerned, not as yet connecting this with Brighton.

'I can't find two of your shirts, and two pairs of pants, and a vest—no, two vests.'

Then he realized what she was talking about, and felt that his face was, ridiculously, colouring. Fortunately her head was still in the wardrobe.

'I expect they're around somewhere,' he said, as casually as he could. 'Pass me out a handkerchief, would you, please?'

She turned with a clean handkerchief for him, and said, 'But they're not. I've looked. It really is very strange. I'm quite sure I put them here in the proper place when they returned from the laundry. I always do. Always.'

She looked at him as though challenging him to deny this, as though it were a reflection on her efficiency.

'It's not important,' he said weakly, annoyed that he seemed unable to look at her.

'But it is,' she insisted. 'If things start disappearing from a house, you never know where it'll stop.'

He could think of no way of getting out of this, except to kiss her hurriedly and say that he had to rush to the office. As he left, she was turning thoughtfully back to the wardrobe. He tried to comfort himself that, when the clothes could not be found, she would forget all about it. Then, later on, he could bring them back quietly, and slip them into the dirty-clothes basket. Or would that in itself be a betrayal? Did she count how many garments normally went to the laundry each week, so that extra items would puzzle her? Perhaps he had better get them laundered somewhere in Brighton, and then put them back into his wardrobe, but in an unaccustomed place. But that, too, might be dangerous. For she might know at once, from the way the things were folded, or ironed, or some damn thing, that they had been to a different laundry. Michael swore to himself, appalled at the dangers and difficulties that could arise from the most trivial things. Very well then, he would just let the garments remain missing, and no doubt Olive would soon forget all about them. At least, he hoped she would. But a small presentiment of disaster remained in his uneasy thoughts.

She did not forget. For a day he thought that she had, and then she suddenly said, 'Do you think Joan took them?'

'Took what?'

'Those shirts and things of yours.'

Michael laughed. 'My dear, why should Joan steal my underclothes?'

'She's got a boy friend, you know.'

'Oh, but I can't believe it,' protested Michael, trying to sound convincing. 'It's too trivial.'

'But that's just the point, Michael. If she's pinching some things, she's probably pinching others. You can never tell what's missing in a house this size. I think I shall have to get rid of her.'

Then he was silent. He felt that he was on an unsafe footing, as though one chance remark might make him stumble and plunge him down. He could not allow the girl to be sacked so unjustly; or could he? No accusations would, of course, be made. She would get another job with ease. Was that perhaps the best way? He felt shabby even for thinking so.

To his relief, Olive did not sack the girl. Indeed, a few days went by without anything further being said, and he began to think it was all being forgotten. On the Thursday afternoon, early closing, he went over to the Brighton room to wait for Dorothy. She seemed always to be able to get away on Thursdays, and that was chiefly when he saw her; though sometimes, also, of an evening, when Gann went to London. He waited for her in the shabby little room that they now almost regarded as home. His desire for her had not been, he reflected, a simple lust that passed with the gratification. In their continued love-making he found an excitement that he had never before known. After the ecstasy he felt neither repulsion nor indifference, but a deep tenderness for her; and it seemed to him that her feelings towards him, too, were not merely physical, but touched with a happiness that he found a little pathetic. Sometimes, when they had to get out of bed, dress and return to their houses, he felt so strong a reluctance to part from her—and nothing physical in it then—that he discussed wildly with himself whether he could any more endure to live with Olive, or

whether he and Dorothy should come into the open and go away together. But, of course, there was always the thought of the children.

He heard her coming up the stairs, and the lock of the door turning. He stood up. She came into the room demurely, almost shyly. But then she ran three quick steps to wind her arms round his neck, reaching with her lips for his, murmuring happily. The excitement that he felt was intense. He mumbled to her to come to bed, and she docilely obeyed, pulling off her clothes. His delight at the sight of her body did not diminish. When he was with her in the bed, the rest of his life dissolved into nothing.

Afterwards, as they lay side by side gazing at the cracked ceiling of the room, he said, 'I'm not sure that I can go on like this, having you just occasionally. It may be that in the end we'll have to go away together.'

He turned his head towards her, and she smiled sleepily. 'It won't happen, darling,' she said. 'You've got your family, and I've got Gann. It won't happen.'

'Then what will? How will it work out in the end?'

He thought that she shivered for a moment, as though fearful, but all she replied was, 'I don't know. Let's not worry about what happens next. Let's enjoy what happens now.'

So he laughed and put his arms round her shoulder, pulling her towards him to kiss her gently, without any more passion, but with love. Then he leaned out of the bed to grope in the pocket of his jacket, which had been tumbled on to the floor, to find cigarettes and matches; and he lit one for each of them, watching her as she lay with her head on the pillow, the hand holding the cigarette raised, the sheet slipping away from the breast beneath it.

But she was never quite lost in contentment, never quite shaken from her practical nature. It was she who remembered the time they would have to get up and dress, in order to leave; and, when he tried to start to kiss her again, put her hand over his mouth, laughing at him, forbidding. When they were ready he took her in the car to Brighton station—this was the safer method of transport they had now agreed upon—and saw her on to the local train. Then he got back into his car and drove home.

Olive was sitting on a stool in front of the fire. She looked up at him and smiled, and asked, 'How do you like my new dress?'

'That was decent of you,' he said, joking. 'I could easily have gone the evening without knowing it was new. But I like it very much. It suits you.'

The dress was well enough. It was blue, and the skirt draped decoratively about her as she sat on the stool. He bent down to kiss her cheek. 'You look charming,' he said.

'Let's have a drink to celebrate it.'

He saw, with some surprise, that she had put drinks out on the side table.

'Well, that's nice. Are we having a party?'

'No. But I just felt like it, Michael. And I had a little windfall today. Mr. Horsfall rang up to say that some of the shares that Daddy left had declared a bigger dividend, or something. Anyway, I was £125 richer than I expected to be.'

'Hence the new dress?' Michael gave a mock sigh. 'Now I'm ruined. You get the windfall and spend it on a new dress and riotous living. I have to pay nearly all of it out in surtax. What'll you have? Sherry?'

'Gin.'

'Hm. It is a party. Lime or tonic? Lime and soda, eh?' He took her drink over to her, and poured himself his usual whisky. He sat down in an armchair to the side of the hearth and she raised her glass to him and sipped. It was very comfortable and agreeable—the pleasant room, the drinks laid out, his wife amiable and in a new dress. She did look charming; pretty, one might say, were it not for the air of dignity about her, of staidness. Pretty was too light a word, handsome too ponderous. Charming, agreeable, sensitive, modest—a little, perhaps, of each of those. Now that he had Dorothy, he could regard his wife far more objectively, and more appreciatively. It was odd, that. For the women were totally unlike. She was ideal for the part of housewife and mother. He knew his luck. He was not in the least in love with her; that also he had learned with certainty from Dorothy. But he had for her a warm affection and the highest respect. The only cloud was his feeling of guilt. If only she could know about Dorothy and not mind! It was humiliating that over some such triviality as those shirts and underclothes he should be forced to lie to her, like a small boy who had been stealing jam from the larder. And such instances would be bound to recur; it might well be that, over one of them, his lie would become apparent, and he would stand before her, not only guilty, but stripped of dignity.

However, he put those thoughts from him and gave himself up to the pleasantness of this half-hour. She talked of this and that—local gossip, mostly, but none of it malicious—with unusual liveliness. He thought how anyone who looked in upon them unawares would think them an ideal couple, chattering amusingly to each other over a drink before the fire, the children upstairs in bed, the house comfortable and well-endowed.

When they had had the other half, she said to come in

to supper. She led the way to the dining-room, opening the door with a little dramatic flourish. The table was set with the best service, and with candles alight in the silver sticks which were normally kept in the bottom of a cupboard. Their two places were laid with melon. He looked at the sideboard and saw a tray of cold lobster and a cheese-board. In the cooler was a bottle of hock.

'A bit more of my ill-gottens,' she said. 'I thought I'd give us a surprise supper. If you have to pay this bit of it out in surtax, at least you'll have had it to eat. I hope the wine's all right. I left it to the man at the shop. He said you'd like it.'

'Yes,' he said, glancing at it, 'it's first rate. This is nice of you.'

He thought she coloured slightly. But, if she did, she hid it by standing to her chair and waiting for him to lower his head while she said grace. He held the chair for her and bent to kiss her again on the cheek.

'Tuck in,' she said.

If there were only this, he thought, how much less complicated his life would be—even how much pleasanter. With what contentment could he have entered into this evening, if he were not enmeshed with Dorothy? Why could it not have been Olive who stirred him so inexorably? He sighed. Things just happened the way they did, that was all one could really say as explanation.

When they finished their meal, Olive said, 'I've put the coffee Cona in the sitting-room. We can make it in there.'

'Lovely. By the way, where's Joan?' He suddenly realized that the evening had been refreshingly free of the mother's help.

'I gave her the evening off. She wanted to go to the pictures.'

Even then, he afterwards remembered, he did not quite

foresee what was going to happen. How could he have been so stupid? It was just, perhaps, that he did not expect the advance to be made by Olive. It did not enter his thoughts. They slept together now at most once or twice a month; lately, it had been not at all. It was not something for which she had often pressed.

They left the supper crockery on the table—'Joan promised to clear it up in the morning'—and went into the sitting-room. As Olive plugged in the electric cona, Michael went to the drinks cupboard and got out some brandy. 'That meal needs to be rounded off. Can you manage a small one?'

'Of course. Why not?' Her head was bent over the coffee machine, which she was examining.

'Absolutely no reason, my dear. You usually don't like to drink very much, that's all. Not that we have,' he added quickly.

Warming the glass for her in his two hands, he carried it over to where she sat on the settee in front of the fire, the coffee tray on a low table in front of her. The hot water was starting to belch now through the coffee. He stood there, watching it with sleepy satisfaction, and she speaking of something or other quite unimportant, until the fragrance was all around the room. Then he put her glass down on the table before her and stood with his back to the fire, his palms around his own drink, looking down at her.

Raising her glass a little towards him, she said, 'Darling,' and sipped.

He could scarcely, at that point, have failed to understand. His reaction was astonishment, but he automatically raised his own glass in return and put it to his lips, and that hid it. Then he was filled with dread. The invitation was so apparent, and he would have to refuse it;

the question was whether he could do so without wounding her. The only chance of that, it seemed to him, was obtuseness, not to notice what was happening. Olive would hardly put the thing into words. He was, indeed, amazed that it was happening at all. It seemed too heavily ironic, too clumsily contrived, that she should offer, for the first time for ages, on the very day that he had spent with Dorothy. It was as though there were some instinct that warned a woman of a rival, even if she knew nothing of what was happening, and aroused in her desires that would otherwise not have been felt.

He went to sit in his armchair, but she said, 'No, come and sit by me, Michael. I want to talk.'

For a moment he hesitated, but there was no refusing that—it would look altogether too obvious. He smiled awkwardly and sat down on the settee beside her. 'And what do you want to talk about?'

'Us.'

Could she have heard anything about Dorothy? Impossible. But no, not impossible, of course; they could have been seen together by some local busybody who would carry the gossip to Olive—and to whom else? He managed, however, to keep his voice light, and to reply, 'Well, that all sounds very solemn. What's up?'

'It's difficult to put it clearly. It's that for some time past, we seem to have been losing touch with each other, drifting away, becoming almost strangers. . . .'

'We've been married a long time,' he said. 'Feelings get hidden by the routine of living, but that doesn't mean they're not still there.'

'Doesn't it? Truly, Michael?'

'My dear girl, what do you want me to say? I assure you I'm as fond of you as always. I like living here with you and the children. We don't grate on each other. There

are not many married couples I know who could say that.'

She was silent.

'You want some romantic declaration of love?' he asked. 'Now come, Olive, let's be our age, as the saying goes. I don't think, if we're being frank, that we were ever passionately in love with each other. Were we? Would you say so?' He waited. 'We've been living together too long to make a pretence of things. Let's be grateful for what we have,' he lamely concluded.

'I am, Michael,' she said at last. 'Or rather, I was. But lately I've felt that we are losing what we had.'

'Oh, nonsense.'

'No, it isn't. I don't mean that you're deliberately unkind. You were never that. But you've come to take me for granted.'

This was sterile, the old cliché of matrimony. What on earth was he to say in reply? He began to feel irritated, almost angry, and that would probably have been a good and natural reply; if it had not been for the knowledge of Dorothy. Yet this was the most dangerous moment. Even his hesitation before replying seemed significant. 'Isn't this a rather silly conversation?' he managed. 'Surely we know each other too well to have to start analysing each other.'

'I'm not sure that I know you at all. I used to think I did, but lately . . .' Then she smiled at him and said, in a different mood. 'Oh, never mind. You're right, I am being silly. Get me another brandy, darling.'

'Do you think you should?'

'Why not? I'm feeling like it this evening.'

'Well,' he demurred, getting up and putting a small tot into her glass. 'But that's the lot. We don't want a lost week-end.'

She giggled politely, then gazed at him. 'Michael, tell me you love me.'

'I'm very fond of you,' he said, 'and very glad that you're my wife.'

He thought she would check at that, but she did not. She put her hand on his and said, 'I don't think I'm a very good wife. But I do love you, Michael, and I'm glad that we have children. Are you glad?'

'Of course,' he said, touched for the first time. 'Now listen, all this is very silly, and I think you're a little drunk!' The joke seemed the best way out of the situation. 'Let's stop it, shall we?'

'Let's go to bed.'

He wildly considered some absurd sort of comic by-play in which he would keep up the pretence of misunderstanding, declare that it was an excellent idea since he had had a tiring day and could do with a good night's sleep. At the same moment the thought of those damned underclothes and the couple of shirts returned to his mind, as additions to the farce. Then he knew quite suddenly that he hadn't a hope of keeping up the deception, and that, without time for thought, he must declare. He tried to look at her, but could not. So, staring at the fire, he said, 'I'm afraid not, Olive.'

There was a pause, then she asked, 'Why not? This is what we should talk about, isn't it? I'm not completely stupid, Michael. Something's gone wrong. Tell me what it is. I want to know, darling.'

'Do you? It isn't wise.'

'Tell me quickly.'

'Very well.' He turned to face her. 'I've fallen in love with somebody else. I'm damn sorry. It can happen.'

He had expected some sort of outburst, but instead she was very quiet.

'Who?' she asked.

'Does that matter?'

'Are you having an affair with her, Michael?'

Desperately he considered one last dodging lie, but the time for that had passed. 'Yes.'

He had looked away again at the fire, and he waited what seemed a long time before she said anything else. He guessed that she was making an effort to speak at all, but dared not turn round to see.

At last she said, 'So that's what it is. I suppose I really knew, but I wouldn't admit it to myself. Thank you for being honest with me.'

Then he turned on her. 'Really, that's too much. I refuse to be on the receiving end of your Christian behaviour. I have not been honest with you, and you know damn well I haven't. If we're going to discuss this at all, let's talk sense, for heaven's sake.'

'Who is she, Michael?'

'I don't think that would help at all.'

Suddenly she began to sob. Then she cried out, in almost a gentle wail, 'Oh, what am I going to do?'

'That's up to you, Olive,' he said soberly. 'I will, of course, agree to whatever you want. But I don't think you should make any sort of decision now, this evening, when we're both too upset.'

'Is she anybody in this town?'

'Yes.'

'Do I know her?'

'Hell,' he said, 'this isn't a guessing game. She's Dorothy Gann.'

'Oh, Michael, no! That ...'

'That what?'

'She's so common.'

Then he laughed. He put his head into his hands, and

laughed. She too, of course, knew at once how maladroit the remark was. But she had made it, that was the point. It was the first thing that had slipped out of her mind. But his laughter did not last long. He saw that she was sitting there blackly. 'I'm sorry,' he said, checking himself. 'I couldn't help it.'

'Well, I'll say it again. She's a common little tart.'

'Let's stop this, shall we?'

'Everybody knows it. She was a tart on some docks in the north, Glasgow, I think, and her husband was a seaman who met her there and married her. Everybody knows this. You can't keep gossip quiet in a town of this size.'

'I loathe a town of this size,' he said, 'for its pettiness and spite. I thought you were a bit above that—listening to tales that are all lies.'

'Michael, they're not lies. You can see by simply looking at her.'

'What becomes of Christian charity?'

'I'm sorry for her, of course. At least, I was. But when it comes to stealing my husband . . .'

'She did not steal your husband,' he cut in sharply. 'There was no question of anything of the kind. You speak as though this was some pick-up affair.'

'Isn't it?'

'I told you at the start that I'm in love with her. I've thought of going away with her.'

'Then why didn't you? Why didn't you run away with this street-walker, without telling me? It would have been fitting.'

'Because of the children.'

She began to sob at that, not violently, but quite gently, sitting upright on the settee, the tears forming as though reluctantly in her eyes and slowly tipping out on

to her cheeks. 'You can speak now of the children! Michael, how could you do this to me?'

'There's no use going over and over it,' he said wearily. 'These are the facts; and I suppose you had to know them some time. I'm sorry about it, Olive, truly I am. But I can't alter it, and I wouldn't if I could.'

'Does her husband know?' she suddenly asked.

'No.'

'Suppose he should find out and take divorce proceedings.' She went white at the thought. 'What dreadful thing have you done? It'd be a public scandal.'

He shrugged. 'I don't think it'll happen. Don't worry. We don't have to worry about what anybody else is going to think, but about us, Olive. What are we going to do? That's the question, now that you know.'

'I won't divorce you,' she said quickly, and with rancour. 'I won't, ever. No matter what you do, or what she does, I will never divorce you.'

'Very well,' he said, his lips pale. 'That's established. You won't divorce me. Where do we go from there?'

The fact of his infidelity now seemed to get through to her in all its meaning. It was as though, until now, she had simply reacted from shock, but now she began to stare in front of her at nothing, and to whisper. 'You've been sleeping with her. With that woman.' She was no longer weeping, but her cheeks were tear-stained. 'Suppose the children ever got to hear of it. Suppose, when he got older, your son learned how his father behaved. How could you bear such a thing? How could I? How could I?'

It was hopeless, he realized, to attempt any sort of comfort. Though he wanted to comfort her. He wanted to try to explain to her that his feelings for her and the children were warm and affectionate, and that they had

nothing to do with this passion for Dorothy that had swept into his life—nothing whatever to do with it. Hopeless. She would not even listen to such an attempt. And yet he wanted to comfort her. He would have liked to put his hand on her shoulder, and soothe her as one soothes a child. But hopeless. He simply sat in silence.

Suddenly she turned on him angrily. 'How dare you do this to me? Every moment that I think of it is worse. How dare you? It was by marrying me that you got yourself into a position in the town. Where would you have been without that? A clerk in the insurance office. It's my father's business that provides your living.' She suddenly began to cry again. 'Oh, if he were alive, it'd be a different story. You wouldn't dare then. But now that I've no one to protect me—except you, that's what you ought to be doing as my husband, instead of whoring off with this dreadful little tart.'

Her use of the word shocked him. He would not have thought her capable of that. It seemed to him that they must somehow bring all this to an end, that he could not much longer endure it.

'I know this has been a big shock to you,' he tried, 'but let's be sensible about it, Olive. It doesn't help to shout at each other.'

'What do you expect? You tell me you're sleeping with another woman, and you want me to discuss it sensibly, as though it were something like where we were to go for our summer holidays. I think you expect a great deal of me.'

'I'm only trying to make some sort of sense,' he pleaded. 'It isn't as though anything we say now can make any difference to the facts. What's happened has already happened. The only difference this evening is that you've learned about it.'

'But that isn't the only thing. What about the future?'

He checked. Then he said surlily, 'I don't know.' And that was the truth of it. In the turmoil of her discovery of what had happened, he had not thought for a moment of what would be possible now. Because the truth was known between Olive and himself, would that force him to a decision?

As though she knew what he was thinking, Olive said, in a voice that had lost its anger, starting to plead, 'Tell me that you'll finish, Michael. If I could forgive you, you would end it, wouldn't you? Darling, tell me that.'

'I don't know,' he repeated. 'We can't decide anything now, while we're so upset. I just don't know, Olive.'

She had her handkerchief clutched in her hand, resting on her lap, and she was fidgeting nervously with it. It was as much as he could manage not to shout at her to keep still.

In a low voice, almost a whisper, she said, 'I couldn't bear the shame of it, if everybody knew. I think I should kill myself.'

'Now, for heaven's sake, don't say such silly things.'

'I believe that I truly would.'

'You're merely being melodramatic, and it doesn't suit you. There's no point in going on talking like this.'

At that she seemed to emerge from a dreaminess, shake her head a little; and, to his relief, she stopped fiddling with the handkerchief.

'I know that I'm in the wrong over all this, Olive,' he said. 'And that's putting it mildly. But there's no use discussing that. You have the right to say what you want me to do now. If you want me to go away—well, all right, I will.'

'I don't want a scandal. Do you hear? I won't have a

scandal—for the children's sake, and for mine. Nobody knows now, except you and me.'

'And Dorothy.'

She blazed again. 'That you should have put us into her power! Michael, you must have been insane. To give a tart like that power over us. . . .'

He stopped himself from protesting. He felt, now, too tired for anything but a longing for silence.

'She can be paid off,' Olive went on, more calmly. 'That's the way it must go.'

'If you insist on misunderstanding the situation,' he said wearily, 'I can't prevent you.'

'I understand it better than you think. It'll be a question of price. And you must pay, Michael, for I will not have a scandal.'

He shrugged. 'If it were a question of price, of course I would pay. But it isn't. It's a question of three people, and what they feel and want, and what they're forced to do, by themselves, or by each other. It would probably be better if I went away. It would get it over quickly.'

She shook her head. 'If you think I'm going to surrender . . .' She got to her feet, very cold and calm now. 'I'm going to bed.' She glanced at the brandy glasses still standing on the side table, and picked them up to take them into the kitchen, since she always washed up the best glasses herself. 'My dinner surprise didn't turn out quite as expected, did it?'

He said, 'Oh, damn!' and turned away towards the fire-place, staring into the dying fire. When he looked round again she had gone. He wandered moodily about the room, trying to think rationally but not succeeding. He went into his own room, put a piece of notepaper on to his desk and tried to write a letter to Dorothy, telling her what had happened. But there seemed no way of

putting it that was not banal, melodramatic, quite out of the key in which it had all actually happened. In any case, he would not dare send her a letter, in case Gann got hold of it. Gann, he was quite sure, had no scruples about reading letters. So he tore up the trite nonsense he had written, threw it into the waste-paper basket, and then thought suddenly that the basket would have to be emptied. So he gathered together the pieces of the torn letter, took them into the sitting-room and put them on to the fire.

Now he would have to go to bed. That was the moment he had been shirking. If he went upstairs and found that Olive had locked the bedroom door against him, in the conventional way, he knew that he would burst out laughing again. The whole thing, as he looked back on it, was so ham, so corny. The evening seemed to have teetered throughout on the edge of farce.

When he went upstairs, however, and softly tried the door-handle of their bedroom, it was not locked. He switched on his own bed-lamp. Olive was in her bed, her back towards him, the bed-clothes swathed almost over the top of her head. He knew, of course, that she was not asleep. But she did not move. He quietly slipped out of his clothes and into his pyjamas, doused the light and got into bed. Then he at once remembered, irritably, that he had not cleaned his teeth. Damn his teeth. But he would also have to use the lavatory, or he would certainly be woken in the middle of the night. Muttering to himself, he got out of bed, went into the bathroom; when he came back he could see, in the shaft of light from the landing, that she had not moved. He shut the door and got back into his own bed, prepared for a sleepless night, but in fact falling asleep almost at once.

It was not, of course, finished there. It dragged on for

days, shifting from one mood to another. Whenever he came into the house Olive would be sitting in the big room in a half daze, and it would be evident that she had been weeping; though not again did she let him see her weep. But what happened then would vary. A few times she was angry again, flaring at him, calling names at Dorothy. Once she quietly announced her intention of going to the parish priest.

'I thought you wanted to keep it quiet,' he protested. 'Anything I said to a priest would be private.'

'Oh, come now, Olive. This is a small town. Old Potts is all right as a padre, but he gossips like a mothers' meeting.'

Mostly, however, she was quiet and plaintive.

'I will not have the children hurt,' she insisted. 'What we make of our own lives is our own affair, but we've no right to bring them into it.'

She was convincing herself that it was on account of the children that, after a suitable interval for punishment, she was going to forgive him and take him back to her, and incidentally bind him much more closely to her than ever, now that she had a sense of guilt to hold over him. Michael was not deceived by this, even if Olive herself were. The trouble was that the argument about the children was truly valid for him in any case.

Of his responsibility towards Olive he was not nearly so conscious. When he looked back at their marriage, he saw that, on his side, a good part of the motive had been the desire to get money, position in the town; it had not been merely covetous—he was too young then for such cynicism—but had appeared to him as a matter of pride, of fulfilment. And why had she married him? He could only dimly guess at some sort of reason, but he thought it was probably a physical hankering that she

felt bound to repress, mixed up with a curious wish to defy her father. However you looked at it, they had neither of them married for love; neither had known what such a thing was. Did he now? Was he in love with Dorothy, in anything except a physical sense? Throughout the dreary days that followed, he kept asking himself that. And he thought that, in the end, he probably was. He knew, at least, that his feeling for her was the strongest emotion he had ever felt, though he could not define it. The memory of her gave him a sudden jerk of excitement, a momentary happiness, that seemed quite real, and not entirely physical. If it had been a simple choice between the two women, he had no doubt what course he would pursue, and chance the consequences. But it was not. There were the children. Now and then, during those days, he stared at them when they were playing and had not noticed him. At those times he knew that he was defeated; that, when Olive finally demanded his choice, he would give in.

She was not ready to demand it, however, for some days. At first he decided bitterly that she was simply being bitchy, dragging out the punishment; but after a time he felt that he was probably unfair to her, and that she too had a personal decision to make.

Three nights later she seemed to have made it. When he came in from the office he found her sitting, as usual, by the side of the fire, but she seemed calmer and did not appear to have been weeping. When he went in she asked him to sit down and listen to her.

'We can't go on like this, Michael. I couldn't stand very much more of it. No, don't say anything—not until you've heard what I have to say. I was terribly upset when you first told me, and I said things that I perhaps didn't mean. Ever since has been absolute hell. No, please don't

say anything. I wondered once or twice whether I was going out of my mind. Then, yesterday afternoon, when nobody was about, I went into the church and tried to pray. . . . Well, that's my affair. What I want to tell you is that we must come to a decision.'

He nodded and was going to speak, but then thought he had better not. And this she seemed to appreciate, for she went on in a softer tone: 'First of all, there are the children. It's said that most of the juvenile crime comes from children of broken homes. I don't think that would happen to Tony or Martha, of course, but all the same . . .'

'We owe it to them, I grant you that. But it isn't quite so simple. Children can suffer just as much from living in unhappy homes; or so one hears said. We neither of us really know anything about this, Olive. It's just newspaper articles we've read, and that sort of thing.'

'I know it to be true,' she said. 'I know it by instinct, if you like. And you're right. The worst of all for them would be an unhappy home. And the worst for us too, Michael. When I say we must come to a decision, I mean a real decision, not just being polite and conventional about it.'

'Tell me plainly what you want.'

This seemed to call for more control than she was already exerting. For a minute or so she said nothing, and strove to calm herself. He sat in silence, not interfering. At last she said in a low voice, 'You must give up this woman—absolutely and completely. And then our marriage can go on, and we'll try to make it just as it was before, as though none of this had ever happened. I didn't think to start with that I should be able to do that. But I'm sure now that I can. I've been thinking it over hard, Michael, and I am sure.'

After a pause, he asked, 'And the alternative?'

'There is no alternative for me. I couldn't continue to live with you if I knew that you had a mistress. And if you left me, I think I should kill myself.'

Although she said this last quietly, he could hear the hysteria coming back into her voice, and he hastily stopped himself from arguing. 'I won't even listen to you talking such nonsense. But when you say we have to make a decision, I agree with you. And it is for the sake of the children, primarily—we both know that. Let's be honest. Do you imagine I haven't been thinking about it too? It would be better for them if we stayed together, but only on condition that we can live reasonably happily together. Can we?'

'Oh, Michael, I hope so.' She began to weep gently. 'I'm so tired that I scarcely know what I can do.'

Then he was moved to put his hand with compassion upon her arm. 'I'm terribly sorry, and ashamed, to have done this to you. Do believe that. I won't try to explain why it happened; not certain that I know myself. But this I am sure of, Olive. If we were to decide to make a go of it again, I could live happily with you. To put it no higher, I'm very fond of you, and always have been.' She had put her other hand on to his, and was gripping it. 'But we do have to see this straight. Whether we could live happily together again ultimately depends, not on me, but on you.'

'How, darling?'

'If you kept on thinking about all this, and letting it dominate you, so that whenever you got into a temper you'd throw it up at me again, and I'd know that you had never put it out of your thoughts—then we couldn't be happy.'

'I would try,' she uncertainly promised.

And that, he supposed, was about all either of them could ask of the other. The physical thing was possible enough; he could stop sleeping with Dorothy, stop seeing her. But whether he could then sufficiently forget her to live peacefully with his wife, and whether Olive could sufficiently forgive him—well, they could both try.

As they had. That was all seven months ago, and ever since they had both been trying so hard to re-establish their lives together. Olive, he thought, had probably succeeded. Once she had decided to forgive him, and to take him back into her bed, she soon had the carrying of her third child to occupy her thoughts; a deliberate pregnancy, Michael was sure, though she had never said so. No doubt she had regarded that as a chain that would fasten him quite certainly to her. And, of course, it had. So she had her husband back, her rival defeated, and her household secured, without any suspicion of scandal in the town. With Michael dutifully attendant she had resumed all the little social engagements with which she filled her life, and it was with a serene face that she met her friends. All was well with her.

But not with him. He made the pretence, but wearily and with indifference. It might have been better, he told himself, if he had not gone to see Dorothy to tell her that it was all finished. Of course, he had to; even Olive had seen that. He could not just leave it in the air, and he certainly could not write. So they met for the last time; not in the room at Brighton—he feared that too much—but in his car. He drove her out in the darkness of the evening, pulled up by the roadside and told her as gently as he could. But it was not gently enough. She had had no warning. It was his hope that, when he told her, she would fall back into the tough sort of careless mood in which she had first met him. She had known many men,

and perhaps she would regard him, with a shrug, as just one other.

'Darling, there's nothing we can do,' he said miserably. 'We're caught. The children . . .'

'Okay. Don't keep talking about it.'

'There were never any pretences. We knew this from the beginning. We said so, right at the start.'

'Oh yes, it's all right,' she agreed, but dully.

After a pause in which he strove for something to say, he managed, 'Perhaps it's best, and we'll see in the end that it is. The whole thing's rounded off, like a very happy time, like a holiday, almost, darling.'

He wished that she would become angry and blast at him. That would have been easier. But she did not. She sat in the car, staring at the darkness through the wind-screen and to his surprise he saw that there were tears on her face.

There was nothing to say, he knew, that could be of comfort. 'I'm going to take you back now. May I kiss you good-bye?'

She shook her head. Suddenly she opened the door of the car, and was out, running up the road. Startled, he got out and went after her. There was a slight drizzle of rain, and almost no light from the sky. When he caught up with her, she was stumbling a little. He held her arms and stopped her. 'What on earth did you do that for?'

'Leave me alone,' she muttered. 'Let me be.'

'But I can't leave you out here.'

'There's a bus.'

He remembered that a country bus route came this way, and that in fact there was a stop on the next corner, where a cottage dimly shaped.

'But that's absurd. Come back into the car, and I'll drive you home.'

'No, no.' She was trying to free her arms. 'Let me go, Michael. I'd rather.'

He shook her a little. 'Don't be silly. Come back with me.'

Then he was aware of an engine sound at the bottom of the hill. Crawling up the slope came the lights of a bus. At that moment she broke free from his hold and ran towards the corner. He began to follow her, then checked himself, stopped and went slowly back to the car. He got in, turned it round roughly over the grass verge and drove home.

And, except for that brief occasion at the gymkhana on Saturday afternoon, that was the last time he had seen her. From his deck chair he stared at the beach in the sunshine beyond his dark glasses, but what he saw once more was the loveliness of her as she stood silent on the gymkhana field, with the crowds around her; and the gentle smile that she gave him, no longer angry or reproving, as though she had forgiven him, and quite recovered, and it was all long, long past. Oh, he hoped so. For her sake, he hoped so. And for Olive's.

But it was not to be long, long past. It was to be brought up now into the open, Gann threatened, unless he contributed this money to the bid to control the syndicate. Or unless Olive did. That was something that, at any cost, Michael must stop. If Gann went to Olive now, with a threat of open scandal—but Michael did not believe he could be serious—what might it not do to her? Sooner than that, he must tell her himself what Gann was about. But even in the heat of the day he felt cold at that thought. Bored as he was with the life to which he had committed himself, it was happiness for her. To shatter that now, with her child to be born—rather than that, he would have to submit to Gann's demand and put

up the money. But he was damned if he would, he thought angrily. And yet, was there an alternative? He couldn't see one.

Was it that he did not know enough of exactly what had happened? What, for instance, had Dorothy really told Gann? Or had she told him anything? Was he simply bluffing? For a moment Michael considered wildly whether he should seek out Dorothy, to discover. But he knew he dared not.

He was beginning to feel a little sick. Perhaps it was the sun glaring on his head. He got up from the deck-chair and wandered back along the promenade through the holiday crowd. There was nothing in particular for him to do. Should he, after all, go to the meeting in the syndicate offices, and listen to what was proposed? But no. That would be merely stupid. He turned away from the front in the direction of the place where he had parked his car. Looking idly at one of the doors he was passing, he saw the brass plate of a solicitor. He hesitated, started to walk on, came back, and then made up his mind and entered the building. To a girl behind a desk he said, 'Could I see one of the partners?'

'Have you an appointment, sir?'

'No. I just want to see a solicitor to get some advice.'

'What about, sir?'

'I'd rather discuss that with the solicitor.'

The girl looked doubtful, but got through on the phone, putting the case. Then she told him one of the partners would see him in a few minutes. 'What name shall I say, sir?'

'Smith.'

'It's a Mr. Smith,' she said into the telephone.

He was shown up some narrow stairs to an office

above. The solicitor's name was painted on the door: Mr. H. Norpen. He was a man of middle age, thin, with sandy hair. He motioned Michael to a seat and asked, 'What can I do for you?'

'I'd better say first of all that my name isn't Smith. I don't live in this town, but in this area, and for certain reasons I don't, at present, want to consult my own solicitor. I want some legal advice without disclosing who I am. I'll pay your fee in cash, now, of course. Can you help me?'

Mr. Norpen looked grave. 'It's not usual. What did you want advice about?'

'Divorce.'

'Yours?'

'Let's say, a hypothetical case. This isn't going to hold anyone to anything. There are simply some legal facts that I need to know.'

Mr. Norpen considered for a moment. Then, 'Well?'

'A married man—let's say Smith—carried on an affair with a married woman, Mrs. Brown.'

The solicitor was hunched up in his chair, listening, with one hand holding a pencil and hovering over a sheet of scrap paper. 'Adultery?'

'Yes. This all took place quite a while ago.'

'How long?'

'About a year ago. Then Mrs. Smith found out.'

'Did Mr. Brown know?'

'Smith wasn't sure, but he thought he didn't. He never said anything about it, and Smith and Brown knew each other quite well. When Mrs. Smith found out, there was trouble, naturally. But in the end Smith gave up the affair and was reconciled to his wife. He and Mrs. Brown stopped seeing each other. That was about seven months ago.'

‘And Mr. Brown was still in the dark?’

‘So far as Smith knew. But just recently he discovered that Brown did know about it.’

‘And how,’ asked Mr. Norpen, ‘did he discover that?’

Michael hesitated, not sure how much of this he wanted to tell. ‘Well, Smith and Brown had quite a lot of business dealings with each other,’ he slowly began, ‘and on one matter of business—a pretty large and important matter—they disagreed. It was then that Brown hinted to Smith that he knew about the adultery, and that unless Smith came round on the business matter, Brown would start divorce proceedings.’

The solicitor was gazing at him with curiosity. ‘My advice to Mr. Smith,’ he said, ‘would be to go to the police. If you’ve given me a full account of what happened, Brown’s a blackmailer.’

‘It isn’t as simple as that. Oh, I know it’s blackmail. But there are considerations. Smith’s well known in his own town, he has a position to lose. And then, Mrs. Smith’s going to have another child, and is in a highly nervous state. Smith’s not well fitted to cope with blackmail.’

‘That’s what all blackmail victims say to themselves, my dear sir, or there’d be no blackmail. This is my advice to you. Go to the police. It can be done anonymously.’

Michael shook his head. ‘Anyway, that’s not the point. What I’ve come to you to know is, is there a chink in Brown’s armour?’

‘The obvious one is that he’s committing a crime, if what you say is true. But you don’t mean that. Well now, let me have the facts a little more clearly. The adultery ceased seven months ago. Does anybody know where Mrs. Brown is?’

'But of course. At home.'

'Living with Brown?'

'Certainly. I suppose so.'

'They are cohabiting the same house? Ah well, that puts a very different look on it. How did Brown find out what had happened?'

'I don't know. He said that his wife told him, but I doubt if that's true. He may have known from long before. I'm guessing.'

'But he admits that he knew, not today or yesterday, but some time ago?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'And he continues to live in the same house with Mrs. Brown? He hasn't separated from her?'

'No.'

'Then he appears to have condoned the adultery. Of course, you'll appreciate I can't give a firm opinion without knowing much more about the facts. But if it could be shown that he knew of the adultery, and yet continued to cohabit with his wife, then, of course, he'd have condoned the offence and it would be surprising if he obtained a decree.'

'You mean he couldn't take divorce proceedings?'

'Oh no. I don't mean that. He could take proceedings all right. But I very much doubt if he'd be successful.'

Michael stood up. 'Thank you. How much do I owe you?'

'Let's forget about that. I've done nothing at all, really. Some other time, perhaps, you might want a solicitor in Brighton.' He smiled. 'Then you'll come to me, and I shall overcharge you on this account.'

'No, I'd rather pay something. I'd prefer it.'

Mr. Norpen shrugged. 'If you insist. Shall we say three guineas?'

Michael thanked the man, paid the cash, and went out into the sunshine of the street. He needed to straighten it all out in his thoughts. The threat, he realized, had not disappeared, but it had clearly diminished. Moreover, he began to be sure that Gann was bluffing, for he must surely have known about condonation, and have known that Michael would be bound to tumble to it. Gann could still create a scandal, but he himself would be involved in it in an unsavoury way—the willing cuckold, the condoner. No, it was a bluff. It was a try-on for the money he needed; and Michael clearly saw that his need for the money was compelling, since the prize for which he had a chance was large. Gann would certainly do anything he could to pull it off, Michael was sure of that. And his most likely action would be to go to Olive, and try to work the blackmail on her.

Well that, Michael pondered, he could easily prevent by himself telling Olive what had happened. But was that necessary? It would be at least upsetting for her, and might be almost disastrous. It would be better to say nothing to Olive, but to warn Gann off. He would telephone him that night. He would call his bluff about the divorce, and refuse to put up the money for which he was asking. He would threaten, moreover, a close legal examination of the sale of Lucy Colwell's shops; Michael still had a hunch that, in pretending to buy them for the syndicate, but actually buying them for himself, Gann might have committed some irregularity.

And finally he would warn him to keep away from Olive. He would say into the telephone, 'If you try to involve my wife in this, I'll break your bloody neck.'

LOOKING at his watch, Michael saw that it was half past twelve. There was a bar close by and he turned into it to get himself a glass of beer and a plate of ham and potato salad. When he had finished, the girl brought him some coffee. He felt for his cigarette case, but dropped it back into his pocket; it was too hot for smoking. He drank one more beer and went out to his car. He would have to tell Olive about the shops, and he might as well drive home and do so. There was no point in hanging about.

The countryside through which he drove glowed lazily in the afternoon sunshine. Now that some parts of his life were threatened, all seemed to be, and he regarded the curve of the downs with sadness, as though he were about to lose the scenery which had been familiar to him since boyhood. As he came round the last corner he could see the serenity of Verney Down, with its white wound of a chalk-pit, and the town snugly beneath it on a lesser hill. The bricks and stucco of the buildings of the town itself, as he drove past them, seemed peculiarly dear to him, and as he turned under the trees of The Grange and into the drive of his house he had a sense of everything being precious, but doomed.

Olive was lying down in her room behind drawn curtains; not sleeping, she assured him, only resting, she would get up now. He told her not to disturb herself.

'Is it all right about Lucy's shops, darling?'

'That's what I came home to tell you. I'm afraid it isn't.'

'Oh, but, Michael, it must be. Lucy's counting on it.'

He sat in a wicker chair by the window, pulling back

an edge of the curtain to give him some view towards the downs, and lit a cigarette. 'I'm sorry. But there's nothing more I can do. She sold the shops, Olive, and the syndicate won't sell them back to her. There's no way of forcing them.'

'You mean, that man Gann won't sell them back?'

'Yes,' he admitted dully, 'that's what I mean.'

'But, Michael, it's practically fraud. He must have known about Woolworth's.'

Michael nodded wearily. 'I'm sure he did. But nobody can prove that. At least, we can't. I'm sorry, but there it is. Lucy hasn't made a loss, you know. It's just that she hasn't made so much profit.'

There was silence in the dimmed room while Olive considered. Then she said, 'But why won't he sell? Can't you offer him a profit?'

'Nothing like as much as he'll make—about ten thousand.'

She gasped. 'Then that's what Lucy has lost? Oh, Michael, it's terrible. We've got to stop him. It's nothing but an impudent swindle. I shall call in Mr. Horsfall.'

'You can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Horsfall couldn't help. The sale was perfectly legal. Besides . . .'

'Besides what?' She was suddenly suspicious. 'What is it you're not telling me? There is something, isn't there?'

He understood now the inevitability of it. He had to tell her.

'Yes, there is. I didn't want to tell you because there seemed no point in troubling you with it unnecessarily. But it's no good. Gann knows about me and Dorothy.'

'Oh, no!' It was almost a shriek of agony. She had raised herself cumbrously from the bed, leaning on her

arms, thrusting her head towards him. 'How does he know?'

'He says she told him.'

Olive stared at him for a moment, then dropped back on the bed, moaning quietly. 'I warned you. I said you'd put us both in that woman's power. And now she's using it.'

He was still convinced that Dorothy had not told Gann.—not, at any rate, voluntarily. But there was no point in saying that to Olive.

'And now, because of that,' she asked, 'he's refusing to sell back Lucy's shops?'

'Well, yes.'

'You mean, because of that you can't stop him? Yes, that's it. You must agree with him, or—or what, Michael?' The realization suddenly came to her. 'Oh God, you don't mean he'll—do something?'

Michael was silent. She suddenly struggled from the bed, coming towards him in her petticoat.

'Now you must tell me,' she said, with a forced calmness that was clearly on the edge of hysteria. 'Tell me, Michael.'

'He won't do anything. Don't worry.'

'I know that you're not telling me something. It's because you don't want to upset me, darling, I know that. But you have to tell me. It would be worse not to.'

He turned slowly to look at her. She was kneeling now by his side, her bare arms on his legs, her eyes looking up at him with anxiety. There was no longer any help for it.

'It's about this property syndicate. I had no idea what was going on—I haven't paid much attention to it lately, which was why I knew nothing about those shops. Gann's got himself into the position that he can buy a majority

shareholding, if he can raise the balance of the cash he needs.'

'But what does that matter to us? You can simply retire from the syndicate and have nothing more to do with it.'

'He wants me to go in with him, and supply the sum he lacks. It's eighteen thousand pounds.'

She sank back, sitting now on the floor, aghast. 'Eighteen thousand? But that's mad. You haven't got it.'

'I could raise it,' he said. He felt very tired. 'I could raise it by mortgaging pretty well everything I have. But I'm not going to.'

'I should think not. I never heard of such nerve. Does he think he can swindle you as easily as he swindled Lucy?'

'It wouldn't be a swindle. The investment is probably quite all right. It's just that I won't go in with Gann, that's all.'

This brought back to her a reminder of Dorothy, and a sudden renewal of anguish because Gann knew. She began to weep. 'Oh, Michael, how could you have been such an idiot? You've given him a stick to hold over you, if he wants to. . . . Does he? Is that it?'

'If I don't go in with him,' said Michael dully, 'he says he'll come to you for the money.'

'Let him come.' She was suddenly in a rage. 'Let him come, that's all. He'll regret that.'

'If neither of us puts the money up, he threatens to start divorce proceedings.'

'Oh no.' She stared at him, then put her hands up to cover her face. He wondered whether to touch her arm in an effort at some sort of comfort, but hesitated, and then did not. What was the use?

'He can't get a divorce,' he said quietly. 'I went to a

solicitor to ask—not Horsfall, nobody who knew me, nobody in this town. It's pretty sure that Gann has condoned the—the offence, by continuing to live with his wife. He can't get a divorce.'

'Then no one will know?'

'He can start proceedings.'

'But that's all that matters. If he started them, everybody would know.'

'He couldn't get a divorce.'

'So he couldn't? That doesn't help us. The scandal would be terrible. I couldn't stand it.' The hysteria was well back into her voice now. 'Michael, I won't stand it. He's got to be stopped. It doesn't matter what it costs.'

'I'd sooner go to the police.'

'How could you?'

'He's attempting blackmail.'

'But even then, everybody would know.'

In theory, of course, it could be done anonymously. But not in fact. He thought of all those blackmail cases in which the victim was called, in court, Mr. X. There can never have been one whose identity was unknown to his merest acquaintance. So he said nothing. There was nothing to argue.

'It's no use, Michael. You'll have to let him have the money.'

'No.'

'Then if you won't,' she decided slowly, 'I will. I'd rather lose every penny that Daddy left me, than be driven from this town by scandal. He shall have my money.'

Michael took hold of her hands. 'Let's be sensible. You wouldn't lose your money if you put it into this syndicate. Indeed, you might well make a bit more. But it would mean putting it into Gann's control. It's bad enough now, Olive, without making it worse. He gets no money.'

'But then he'll start the scandal?'

'There's no guarantee that he won't anyway.'

'Oh, what a fool you were to get yourself mixed up with these dreadful people. What a stupid, stupid fool! How could you have been so mad?' She got up from the floor and wandered to the far side of the room, clasping her hands. 'We dare not risk it, Michael. We must let him have the money.'

He too rose. 'No,' he said. 'It's no good giving in—no good at all. I'm damn sorry I've got you into this, Olive. But that isn't the way out.'

Then he left the room. The senseless circling of the argument was more than he could stand. He was at a loss, however, for something to do, so at last he got out the garden hose and watered the flower-beds. The thin sound of the spray was calming. By the time supper was ready, Olive also seemed to have consented not to revive the subject. They talked, rather stiffly, of ordinary things, and then he sat in the garden until darkness came and he could go to bed. That was Monday night.

In the morning, too, she was silent about Gann, though Michael saw from her eyes that she had been crying in the night. He wanted to feel compassion for her, but could not; only indifference, only politeness. He dutifully kissed her good morning before he left, and this in itself seemed about to bring on another bout of weeping; but he ignored the signs and hastened away.

The day passed in routine at the office. Michael tried to put the Gann business from his mind, but in the middle of the afternoon it came back to him with force, and he got out his investment register. He had no intention of giving in to the man, but were he forced to, he had better see how practical it would be to raise the money. He pored and calculated, discovering of course that he could do it

with mortgages—he had known all the time that he could, and exactly how he could. But then he shut the book with a gesture of annoyance and returned it to his safe. He would not. He stared from his window at the flat plain bisected by the river, with a barge coming slowly up from the port. He would not. On that he was determined. But the question that followed was how was he going to fill in time? In all the years ahead, with a business that could not possibly absorb him, and a wife for whom he could feel only respect, how would he occupy the emptiness? A hobby? He would play more golf. At the aridity of the answer he shuddered. But what else?

That thought too he closed angrily and put away, as he had put his property register into his safe, out of sight. The office was about to shut, so he got into his car and drove home. He was a little earlier than usual, and at home they were a little late, for he found Olive in the playroom just finishing tea with the children. This was a meal she rarely took, and indeed she was eating nothing now, but he wondered why she had come down to the playroom on this day, and was engaging herself so cheerfully and pathetically with the children. Perhaps she too had faced the question of what she could do to fill the emptiness of living. But no, that would not have occurred to her. Not only had she another child to come, to take hold of her thoughts, but she could always occupy her life with devotion to St. Clement's, which was perhaps for her the same thing as devotion to God. The compassion which he had momentarily felt for her was replaced almost by envy.

However, he could play this game. He gave a cheerful smile and said, 'Oh good, I'm in time for tea. Shift up, Martha. Those buns look good.'

The child laughed with pleasure that they were both there at the tea-table with them. Anthony seemed less impressed, almost suspicious. But bother Anthony. 'Let's have a cup of tea, Joan,' he said to the mother's help. She went off to the kitchen to fetch an extra cup. 'And what have you two done today?' he asked the children.

'Played.' From Anthony.

'What at?'

'Nurses,' said Martha. The boy looked shamed. 'I was a nurse in the hospital, and Tony'd broken his arm, and I . . . ' She rattled cheerfully on, Michael smiling at her; and Olive smiling too, he saw with relief. Indeed, she seemed to want to interest him, almost to placate him.

'They play together very well now that the holidays have just started. But you wait a few weeks, eh, Joan?'

The girl, who was pouring out tea for Michael, made a wry face and laughed. 'They're not so bad together,' she said, with a fondness that seemed to Michael a trifle unreal.

When tea was finished the children ran off into the garden and Michael went to his room with the evening paper. He read it desultorily for a while; not much in it. Then he remembered that the Test match would be on television, so he wandered into the sitting-room and switched on. It was the last day and England were batting, needing some impossible number to win, but comfortably placed, he saw, for a draw. There was not much interest. We should have gone for the runs earlier. He was not a devotee of cricket, but the Tests had some inferior kind of fascination for him, like diplomacy without the danger. But when it was clear that nothing much could now happen to the match, he switched off again and went to fetch some gin, lime and ice. From the hall

he called to Olive, 'I'm going to have a drink. Want one?' And she replied from the bedroom, 'All right, I'll be down in a minute.'

He fixed his own drink, took off his jacket and went to sit by the open windows. The heat had given him a headache. After a while she came down, and he poured her a long glass of lime juice, chinking the ice. When they were settled, she seemed rather silent. He was content with that, to sit in the cooler breeze of the evening, in silence. Suddenly she said, 'Michael, I've made up my mind about what we were discussing last night.'

Wearily he asked, 'Have you? Do we have to go through all that again?'

'No, but I've decided. I'm going to put up the money for Mr. Gann.'

'Look, Olive,' he said patiently, 'we've already discussed this. It's the wrong way. I told you so yesterday. It won't buy him off.'

'Oh yes it will.'

Michael looked round at her, at first not comprehending. Then he was angry. 'What do you mean by that? Have you been in touch with him?'

'Yes. I rang him up.'

'That was a silly thing to do. Why on earth didn't you talk it over with me first?'

'I did. Last night. And you disagreed.'

'And I still disagree, Olive. It's ridiculous. To start with, I doubt whether it's practical. Your money is so tied up, and a lot of it in the business, that I don't suppose you could raise the sum required.'

'Mr. Gann thought of that. He said it wouldn't matter, and that it could be arranged against security, provided I agreed. It's no use glaring at me, Michael. It's my money, and I've made up my mind. I will not,' she said,

suddenly lowering her voice, 'be driven from my home.'

'But look here,'—he walked across the room, angrily getting himself another drink—'it's madness. Can't you see it's just what the fellow wants? Once he has your money, heaven knows when you'll ever see it again.'

'Surely Mr. Horsfall can arrange all that.'

He paused, standing before her. 'I must tell you, Olive, that Horsfall has already warned me once about this syndicate. Frankly, he thinks it's crooked. Brierley warned me too, that morning we went over to the Thurgoods.' He tried now to be patient with her. 'I simply won't allow you to get mixed up in such an unsavoury business, Olive. I won't allow it. You're not going to put your money into it, and nor am I.'

'Then we shall have the scandal.'

'It would be better,' he reasoned. 'Even if we had to live through that, it would be better.'

'I couldn't bear it,' she muttered.

'We could try to do so together.' He realized how pompous that sounded. 'Anyway, I don't believe Gann would dare. And I'll take damn good care he doesn't.' He was striding up and down the room now, growing indignant. 'What the hell does he expect to get away with? He knows he can't get a divorce, and he'd look pretty curious himself if he brought all that into the open. He's blinded by the sudden chance to make a pile, and he thinks he can strut it over everybody else.'

'Michael,' she begged, 'we can't risk it.'

'There'll be no risk. Don't worry about that. If he tries any funny business, I'll make his name stink so badly in this town that he'll have to shift. God, what a bastard, trying to get at you when he knew he couldn't beat me.'

'He didn't. I telephoned to him.'

'Well, I very much wish that you hadn't. But, since you did, it's time he learned that he has the wrong idea. I shall telephone him now.'

'No, Michael,' she pleaded. But he had already got hold of the phone and was dialling the number. At the other end came Gann's sly voice. 'Hallo.'

'Listen. It's me. Michael Padwick.'

'Ah, good evening, Mr. Padwick. I had the pleasure of a talk with Mrs. Padwick today.'

'Well, I fancy you'll get no pleasure out of this one. How dared you? If you think I'll permit my wife to be blackmailed by a bastard like you . . .'

'Now come. That won't help.'

'I'm completely unimpressed by your threats. I've taken legal advice, and you know as well as I do exactly how much chance you've got of getting a divorce—precisely none. As a bluff, it wasn't very clever. And it doesn't work.'

'I wasn't bluffing.'

'Oh yes you were. You know about condonation. Frankly, you can do what you like about it. What I'm ringing to tell you is that my wife has changed her mind. She doesn't intend to have anything to do with the syndicate.'

'I think she will, Mr. Padwick.'

'And I'm bloody sure that she won't. Why, you nasty little rat, if you try any of your funny games on me or my family, I'll . . .'

Suddenly he realized that Gann had hung up. This flung him into a real rage. He chucked down the telephone, struggled into his jacket.

'Where are you going?' asked Olive nervously.

'I'm going round to see the devil, and finish this nonsense once and for all.'

'Oh, Michael,' she begged.

'It's no use, Olive. We can't go on like this. I'm going to have it out with him.'

As he left the room he glanced back and saw that she was lying prostrate now on the couch, with her hands to her eyes, and that she was bitterly weeping.

By the time he got the car out of the garage he was sweating heavily; the evening had grown hotter. His head was still throbbing. Once he was driving the car he calmed himself, making himself go slowly, cautiously; this was the sort of moment in which one had a smash. He drew up at Gann's shop, got out with deliberation—he must preserve an attitude of calm—and rang the bell at the side door. Nothing happened. Stepping back, he looked up to see that the windows of the first floor were open. He rang again. Still no answer. Was he being watched from above? He stepped back a second time to look up, but there were only blank windows. Then suddenly the door opened and Dorothy was standing there.

It was not, after all, remarkable, but it jumped him so badly that he could not, for a moment, say anything. She seemed less astonished. At first she regarded him in silence, her face slightly frowning. Then it cleared into a smile, and she said, 'Hallo.'

'I've come to see Gann.'

She hesitated and then said, 'Come in.' Turning, she led the way through the long passage and up the flight of stairs. As he followed her, awkwardly, but not seeing what else he could do, he recalled vividly the first time she led him up these stairs, and the way her legs had moved, and the glimpse he had had of the unmade bed through the open door of the bedroom. It was as though the whole story of their relationship pressed into his brain in a single instant and he thought he would be

unable to move; but he kept resolutely on at the same pace.

The windows of the living-room were wide open, though no breeze seemed to penetrate.

'Where's Gann?' he asked.

'He had to go out for a while. He'll be back soon.'

'But I've only just spoken to him on the phone.'

'He said he'll soon be back,' she repeated.

Michael stared at her in the realization that, for the first time since she had run from his car towards the bus stop in the darkness of that country road, they were alone together. The green cotton dress she was wearing was clipped tightly to the shape of her body. He saw once again the innocent loveliness of her face; though with a change, a sadness perhaps—or a disillusion? He put his hands to his own face, almost sobbing in distress. 'Oh God, what a mess I've made of everything. What a howling bloody mess!' She said nothing. He did not dare to look at her any more. 'Gann with his claws into me, Olive's world about to be smashed. And you . . .' He lowered his hands now and his gaze came back to her. 'You, whom I love, deserted, left to that bastard, because I'm too much of a coward . . .'

He could say no more. They stood opposite each other in the sultry room, staring at each other in silence. Then she took three quick paces forward and deliberately put her arms round his neck, groping up with her lips for his; and he, sobbing, suddenly grasped her to him, eyes closed, senses wild, the whole world wheeling grandly around the two of them together at the central point. He was murmuring, 'Oh God, oh God, why was I such a fool to leave you? Darling. Darling. I've been so alone.'

'It's been hell.'

'Did you really want me?'

'What do you think?' She put her mouth up to his again, closing her eyes, as though blindly seeking. The thinness of her dress was a nothing through which he could feel the warmth of her body against his. He had a sudden overwhelming memory of the pliancy, the submission with which she made love. The idea that he and she should never again be together—this idea to which he had forced himself for months past—now seemed intolerable. If this were denied him, then he was certain at that moment that he had no interest in life, that it would be a void. He took two awkward steps forward, with her clinging to him as though in some erotic, stumbling fox-trot. Her calves touched the edge of the couch, and he lowered her on to it, not releasing his grip of her, but coming to a kneeling position on the floor by her side. She let her head back on to the cushion behind it, and slowly opened her eyes. In reply to that he muttered, 'I love you. I love you.' She smiled that gentle smile of hers but said nothing. He bent over to kiss her again, greedy of her response. Then he began, a little feverishly, to unbutton her dress. But she put her hand on his and said, 'No, not here.'

'You do want me?'

'Of course I do. But not here, darling. Gann might come back.'

At the name he leant back and stayed still. Gann. Somewhere outside the man was prowling, waiting to claim his reward. And back at The Grange, Olive was prostrate in grief, sobbing. He ought to get up now, take advantage of this break in emotion, run from this room, go, go. He need not go back to Olive, but he ought to save himself. Then he looked at Dorothy lying before him with her hair flattened against the cushion, the neck of her dress gaping and rumpled. And nothing else mattered at all

but that he must have her. He knew it like a drunken man. When he spoke, even his voice was a little slurred. 'I must have you. I must make love to you. I don't care what else happens. I don't care, Dorothy.'

She smiled again at him, touching his cheek with her fingers. 'Have you got your car?'

'Yes. But that's no good. How could I bring you back here, to Gann?'

'If he knows already,' she said with indifference.

'You don't care?'

She brought her face round towards him, smiling, and said in a low voice, 'Why should I? I want you.'

Stifling his impulse, he got to his feet and said, 'Go and pack a bag.'

'You're sure?'

'I just don't give a damn, that's all. I've been living in a prison. Now I'm out of it. Go and pack a bag.'

After a moment's pause she smiled again, swung her legs off the couch and stood up. 'I'll not be long.'

He lit a cigarette. Then he looked round the room and called after her. 'Where's the phone?'

'In the passage.'

He found it—an extension from the phone in the shop below—on a small shelf just outside the living-room door. The surrounding wall-paper was pencilled here and there with phone numbers, like some public booth, he thought with disgust. There was no directory, so he got through to Inquiries and asked for the number of the Monopole Hotel at Brighton. At last he reached its receptionist. 'Monopole Hotel, at your service.'

'Have you a double room?'

'For tonight?'

'For several nights,' he said, with growing abandon. 'A week, maybe.'

'One minute, sir. We're very full.'

'Surely you have something?'

It would be absurd if, at this point, the obstacle were merely to get an hotel room.

'All I can offer you is a suite, sir. Twin-bedded room, private bathroom and sitting-room. Sixty-seven and six per person per night.'

'That'll do.'

'I think you'll like it, sir. It's in the front of the hotel, fifth floor, overlooking the sea, with a balcony. What name is it?'

'Padwick. Mr. and Mrs. Padwick.'

'Will you be confirming, sir? Or coming along? We're so full that I can't hold it indefinitely.'

'We'll be there in about an hour.'

When he had hung up the telephone, he looked along the passage to the open door of the bedroom. But he would not go in there. He waited. And soon she came out, carrying a suit-case. He went to kiss her, but she checked him, 'I've just done my face up.'

'Come on then,' he said, taking the bag from her and almost running downstairs, glancing back to see that she was following, coolly, smiling. He saw that she had changed her dress—had put on, no doubt, her best one, a gaudy, flowered thing. But what the hell?

He led the way to his car, throwing the suit-case on to the back seat, and opening the front for her. Then he got in and started for the Brighton road.

'What about your wife?' she asked, as though it had just occurred to her.

'I simply don't give a damn. I can't help it. I'm through. Whatever happens, we'll think about that later.' He almost shouted at her. 'I don't care. It's over. I don't care.'

With a little smile she reached forward and turned on the car radio, twisting the knob for dance music. When she had found it, she settled back into the seat, comfortable, content. The car came out of the restricted area on to the trunk road and Michael put his foot down on the accelerator, taking, as he passed other cars, reckless risks, at not one of which did she flinch.

When they came into Brighton the place was laughing cheerfully, as ever. The sun had set and the garish lights of the promenade and the piers risen. In the warm night the people crowded thickly on the promenade, beyond which lay the pebble beaches and the sleeping sea. Later there would be a waning moon. The people were crowding in and out of the pubs, or just strolling happily and slowly in the electric light, and here and there pianos were going. Michael felt an easing of spirit as he brought his car out on to the front. He glanced at the girl seated beside him, and into the grimness of what he was doing there began to intrude a gaiety. For the first time, he laughed. She looked round at him, puzzled for a moment, but then she laughed too, responding at once to this mood. This was what to enjoy. He remembered that at their first meeting she had naïvely remarked, 'I like Brighton.'

Outside the Monopole the commissionaire gestured his car into a vacant space. Michael got out and tossed him the keys. 'Put it round in the garage, please. We're staying.'

'Very good, sir,' said the commissionaire, pocketing the tip.

The receptionist swivelled the register for him and he deliberately signed Mr. and Mrs. Michael Padwick as though that in itself were a defiance. The receptionist rang for a page to take up Dorothy's one small suit-case,

neither of them commenting even by a glance on its inadequacy, its shriek of disclosure.

'You spoke of a week's stay, Mr. Padwick,' said the receptionist. 'I'm afraid your suite is booked from next Monday, which leaves only six days, and I don't think we have anything else at that time. . . .' She began to busy herself with an inspection of her ledger.

'We'll cope with that when we come to it.'

The receptionist handed the page the key and the boy led them to the lift, and along the vast corridor to the sombre entrance to their suite. Michael gave him half a crown, and he went off happy. It was as though, Michael thought with amusement, he were doing everything he could to make their arrival memorable, laying a trail for a detective of adultery.

From this thought he was diverted by Dorothy's voice. 'It's grand here.' She had crossed the big sitting-room and opened the french windows on to the balcony, where she now stood, her hands leaning on the iron railing, gazing at the prospect of esplanade, beach and sea. He went to stand beside her, putting his arm around her and gently caressing her buttock. At this height they could scan all the beaches, where parties of people still lingered, quite a few of them bathing, breaking with their antics the reflections of the lights of the pier in the polished surface of the sea. Around the street lamps were twisted gaudy bouquets of electric colours, and beneath them the procession of cars flowed in either direction and the evening strollers passed slowly up and down the promenade; the family groups, the clusters of young men and girls merry from one of the bars and shrieking with laughter, the occasional lonely man quietly pursuing along the paving a girl who walked with deliberately casual air.

With his arm around Dorothy, and the two of them gazing at this prospect, Michael no longer felt any urgency. It was not now as though they had to rush to bed in a frenzy of impatience, as new lovers would; rather it was a restoration of the relationship which had been broken off those months earlier. He put his hand on her shoulder-blade and gently turned her towards him to kiss her.

‘Not with all those people,’ she protested.

‘They’re not looking up at us. And even if they are . . .’ He kissed her with a deliberation, passion held in check. ‘Now I’m happy again,’ he said, ‘for the first time since we parted.’ She rewarded this with silence. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s look at the place.’

She nodded and they went inside to examine the rooms. ‘By the way, drink? And are you hungry?’

‘I could do with a bite.’

Into the house-phone he ordered room service, and asked for a bottle of champagne and some smoked salmon sandwiches, smiling to himself at the thought that this hotel could now be in no doubt at all about them.

The sitting-room was lofty, furnished in comfortable hotel style, if old-fashioned. To one side, on a mahogany and gilt table, stood a huge Victorian china urn which tomorrow he would fill with flowers. From the door in the far wall Dorothy called, ‘It’s a lovely bedroom.’ He went across and looked in with her, joking, ‘It’s got one bed too many.’ He kissed her again, still gently but with more vigour than before. She freed herself and said, ‘We’re looking at the rooms.’ To the right of the bedroom was another door, which she opened on to the bathroom. This too, with its tiled floor, big mirror, rail of thick towels, she approved. ‘Posh,’ she said, gratified.

From the sitting-room came the sound of a key turn-

ing, and Michael went back to find an elderly waiter bringing in the sandwiches, and a bottle of champagne in a bucket wrapped in a napkin. When he had gone, Michael called to Dorothy: 'Come on, it's here.' He was unwiring the cork of the bottle and easing it out so that it shot off with a traditional pop as she came in. It was all so conventional that he burst out laughing as he handed her a glass.

'What's funny?'

'Nothing, darling. Just that I'm happy.'

She accepted that without comment, sitting on the arm of a chair and reaching out for a sandwich. He held up his own glass to toast her, saying nothing because he could think of nothing except the trite to say. He looked at the gaudy flowered dress she was wearing, at her one leg crossed over the other, at the shape of her breasts, and the long bare arm and hand that held the glass. Although the body beneath the dress was so familiar to him, he did not feel as though it was. It was as though he had never made love to her before, and the excitement growing in him was virginal. She smiled at him and he kissed her, on the mouth, hard this time, with tongue exploring. But then afterwards he stepped back from her. There was no hurry, he pleasurably told himself.

Suddenly she put down her own glass, stepped behind him and kissed the top of his head, twisting her arms round his chest and neck. She said, 'It's such a wonderful bathroom. I'm going to have a bath.'

He had put his hand up and caught hold of her hair, pulling her head gently forward over his shoulder so that her face came close to his. 'So long as it's not a very long bath,' he said softly. He gave her hair a little tug and released it, and she kissed him once more and went across into the bathroom. Left alone, he settled more

comfortably back in the chair. Then, seeing his glass was empty, got up to fill it, and took it out on to the balcony. The night was gradually quietening. There were fewer cars and people, and most of the little groups had left the beach. The moon was just starting to show. Sipping his wine, he gazed at the scene which was still sufficiently crowded to give him a sense of looking out on to the busyness of the world from a sheltered refuge; a refuge in which he would take the temporary for the eternal, and in which, behind him, was hidden the woman whom he most desired.

Suddenly he drained his glass, went back into the sitting-room and put it down, then crossed into the bedroom. The ugly centre light was still burning, so he switched that off, leaving only a dim light on the table between the two beds. When he took off his jacket, and opened one of the tall cupboards to find somewhere to put it, he found a towelling bath-gown hanging there. At once he took off the rest of his clothes, throwing them into the cupboard, kicking his shoes under one of the beds. He put on the bath-gown, tying it round him, smoothing back his hair with his hands. Then he went to the door of the bathroom and knocked.

‘Are you still in that bath?’

‘Just out.’

She was standing in the steam of the bathroom, with one of the huge turkish towels wrapped around her, smiling at him that innocent-looking smile which she never lost. She had loosely twisted her hair up on top of her head. He moved quickly across to hold her, kissing repeatedly her unstained lips and her neck, gripping her body in the thick warm folds of the great towel, rubbing her skin with it, glimpsing her breasts and stooping to caress them, and at last picking her up, jabbing at the

electric light switch with his elbow, and carrying her to bed. That it was so long since they had been together added immeasurably to their fervour. Never before had they seemed so complete to each other, straining their embraces as though their sole wish was to crush, to merge. The excitement with which she responded to him increased his own, and as once she gave a little moan and murmured, 'Darling, you're wonderful,' it seemed to him the pinnacle of desire. When at last they were still, and then slowly disentangled their moist limbs, he lay on his back beside her, eyes open, but staring unseeing at the dim glow of the ceiling. He was not consciously thinking, or very much feeling, but was merely exhausted. She had turned on her side, facing away from him, and when he gently raised himself to reach out and douse the light by the side of the bed, he saw that she was already sleeping. He smiled at her tenderly, switched off the light, and sank in a few moments into his own sleep.

In the morning, when he awoke, he stretched out his arm, but the bed beside him was empty. After a moment of alarm he heard a tap running in the bathroom, and he smiled to himself and relaxed on to his back, looking up at the ceiling across which a few streaks of sunlight had escaped from the curtained windows. In the temperance of morning he could survey more clearly the results of what they had done. He was now committed. He could not escape a sense of guilt, but as yet he could uneasily defer it. His mind was seized rather with a feeling of inevitability that he and Dorothy should merge their lives, in spite of all hindrances, all pain, all obstacles. He had sometimes told himself in the past that their relationship was only physical, and that no lasting happiness can be based on that. But now he knew this was not true. In all the years of his marriage, founded upon mutual

respect, he had never once known such exaltation, nor, afterwards, such serenity.

The door of the bathroom opened and she came out, dressed, hair combed, face made up.

'Morning,' he said lazily from the bed, 'Couldn't you sleep?'

Dorothy smiled. 'Did you think I was going to let you see me in that state? Early mornings are not my time.'

She was standing by the bed, and he took her hand, gently pulling her down towards him until he could smell her. 'I love you,' he said.

'Darling.'

But then he ran his hand over his beard, and cried ruefully, 'Talk about mornings! And I haven't even got a razor. We weren't exactly prepared, were we?'

'Look at the creases in this dress. I've got only one other.'

'We'll go and buy some,' he promised. 'And that reminds me, somehow I'll have to get some money. I've only a few pounds on me. Darling, get on the phone to room service and tell them your husband forgot to pack his razor and toothbrush, and ask them to send some up.'

Going, she smiled. 'They'll believe that all right!'

'Who cares for them?'

After she had gone into the sitting-room he got out of bed, stretching his naked body, drawing back the curtains and gazing out to a morning-clean sea. It would have been good to take a bathe, but, of course, he had no trunks. So he went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, stepping under it hot and gradually easing it until, for a few lively moments, it ran quite cold. Blowing with pleasure, he grabbed one of the big towels, briskly rubbing at his skin. His body felt wonderful. As he turned off the shower, he heard a rap at the door, and

then her hand came round offering razor, toothbrush, shaving cream, toothpaste.

'Oh, thanks. Now tell 'em to send up breakfast, darling. Lashings of bacon and eggs for me, and grape-fruit, and lots of hot toast, and coffee.'

She chuckled, saying as she went away, 'You'll grow into a fat old man.'

By the time he was dressed the breakfast was there, laid out on a small table by the windows, with the sun's warmth falling upon it. And Dorothy, sitting across the table from him, with sun-glasses on, unperturbed.

'What are we going to do now?' she wanted to know.

There was no desire in him to discuss that question. Even, he was a little irritated that she should ask it. The dreary business of settling their affairs would have to be conducted in the end. But not for a few days. There could be this one short break of happiness, untroubled by consequences, in his lifetime. Then he realized that she had not meant anything of the sort, but merely what were they to do that day. He smiled with pleasure at the relief of it.

'Shopping, first. We need clothes, bathing suits, flowers—everything to set up house in this slum. Then let's go and get burned on the beach. But first of all I'll have to get some money, and we can't do that until the bank opens. What time is it?' She shrugged. He glanced at his wrist, but he had not put his watch on. He must have left it on the table by the side of the bed; as he went to get it, he glanced again at the rumpled bed, and had a naïve impulse to put his head down to touch the pillow still dented where she had lain. But then suddenly he remembered the glimpse of her bed at home, through the door, on the first occasion he had met her, that still in the evening bore the imprint of her body and Gann's, and

for a moment he felt sick, turned away, hurriedly picked up his watch and looked at it.

'Great Scott!' he said. 'It's half-past ten. The bank's already open.'

He spoke as he strode back to the sitting-room, wanting at that moment to get out of the bedroom as quickly as he could.

Obtaining money proved, in the end, simpler than he had feared. He suddenly remembered that he knew the manager of the nearby branch of his bank—a frequently visiting Rotarian. There was no difficulty in arranging for a sum to be removed from his own to this branch for a week; and, meanwhile, the manager had pleasure in cashing him a cheque.

So they could go shopping. He bought her dresses and shoes and bathing gear. He stood by while she bought night-dresses and underclothes, sheepishly giving his opinion when called upon to do so. On the way back he bought an armful of dahlias which, when they reached their room, he thrust into the large china urn. She announced that they would now have a fashion parade and, pushing him into an armchair, retired to the bedroom to change. He rang for some bottles of gin, some lime juice and ice. By the time she came out in her first dress, he was mixing long drinks. She mocked her fashion parade with exaggerated model poses, but all the same the new clothes were pleasing her. When she appeared in her bathing suit, twirling the wrap aside, he jumped up to seize her, kissing her, wanting to go back to bed right then. But she pushed him off, laughing. 'No, you'll kill yourself. There's plenty of time. Besides, I want to bathe.'

'But you haven't finished your fashion parade,' he protested. 'The night-dresses.'

'That's for tonight.'

She insisted on pushing him into the bedroom to put on the beach clothes they had bought for him, he good-naturedly complying. Then they went down, buying magazines on the way, dodging across the road that was already thick with traffic, and grabbing a couple of deck-chairs to plunk down in the lee of a breakwater; for there was already by now a slight breeze, though the sun seemed hotter than ever. Dorothy lay back in her chair, relaxing in the rays.

'You'll burn,' he warned. So then she took sun lotion and cotton-waste from the gay bucket-bag she had bought and they began the simple, pleasurable beach rites, oiling each other's skin, lazing back with closed eyes, picking up magazines with scarcely the concentration to glance at a few pictures, lighting cigarettes and throwing them away half smoked, and watching idly the delighted antics of the children with whom the beach swarmed. Fortunately the tide was out, uncovering a strip of hard wet sand beyond the shingle, for the beach was thronged with chattering, laughing girls and muscular, dark-haired young men shouting and throwing a rubber ball from one to the other. There was an old man sitting on the stones nearby, wearing blue serge trousers, braces, and a celluloid collar, drinking beer from bottles. A dog that wanted stones thrown barked a raucous chorus.

Suddenly Dorothy got out of her deck-chair and demanded that they should bathe. He had bought her some wooden-soled mules in which she picked her way over the shingle towards the edge of the sand, he following, flattered by the glances she attracted from men lying on the beach. She ran womanlike across the sand, arms splayed outwards from the elbows, and stood with the ripples around her ankles, waiting for him to catch up.

They ran out together into the sea until it was deep enough for him to plunge under. When he came up he urged her to do the same, but she only bobbed, wetting her shoulders.

'I can't swim,' she said.

'Here then, let me take you.' He caught hold of her hand and led her into deeper water, where he could hold her while she made some attempt at the strokes. When a small wave splashed across her face, she spluttering and laughing, he kissed her wet lips, tasting salt.

'I love you,' he said solemnly, but she laughed again and splashed some water in his face.

'But you're not getting a swim,' she said. 'Go on, I'll wait here.'

Michael was no great swimmer, but he put his head down, Australian fashion, and scissored his legs and flailed his arms with all the dash and style he could command, swimming perhaps twenty yards out to sea, then turning to come back to her.

'You're a good swimmer,' she said.

'Right out of training,' he insisted, puffing a little. It was agreeable that, in this matter of sea bathing, he should be so experienced and proficient, and she so helpless and admiring. It gave her almost child status. But when they left the sea and settled down on a rug by their deck-chairs, and she took off the rubber bathing cap and shook out her hair, asking for a cigarette, she was woman again. He put his arm round her and they lay back to dry off in the sun. Someone nearby had started a portable radio. There was a man in a white jacket with a basket of ice-cream cones, shouting his wares. Out to sea, if one raised one's head to look, danced a number of small white-sailed boats. It was all pure pleasure, perhaps even happiness.

After a while he announced it was time for a drink and some lunch. So they gathered their beach wear and dodged the traffic across the road, back into the hotel. She put on one of her new dresses, he slacks and shirt, knotting a silk cravat round his neck, and they went down to the smaller of the two bars and sat on stools, drinking John Collinses. He felt so contented and relaxed that he had a fear she might want to alter, from boredom, the rhythm of the day. But after lunch it was she who suggested the beach again, with elaborate oiling of each other against the sun, and later another incursion to the sea. That so simple a day could pass so happily, he thought as he lay back on the rug, was a revelation of the mystery between Dorothy and himself; that they were happy just to be together. At least, he was. He raised himself on his elbow and asked her suddenly, 'Are you happy?'

'Eh?' She was almost asleep. 'Happy? Yes, I am. It's wonderful. I've never had a holiday like this before in all my life.'

When it was already evening, and the sun could no longer be used for burning, they went back to their hotel room and she dropped into a chair on the balcony, almost dazed with heat and leisure. He ran her a cool bath, and when she came out of it, wrapped around with towel, he knew that then he could lay her across the bed. But at that moment he did not want to. It was as though to postpone until they had finished the day and gone to bed for the night were a token of love, and not simply desire. So he kissed her gently, got her a drink, and went to have a bath himself. After they had eaten, and spent a short evening strolling with the crowds and then sitting idly on the hotel terrace before going up to their room, he had the reward for his earlier restraint in the intensity with which she wished to make love.

The second day passed much as had the first. Miraculously, the weather was unbroken, and the hotel was full of swarthy, peeling people grumbling ecstatically at the heat. What Michael marvelled at was the continuance of his happiness. She was such an uncomplicated person, entirely without subtlety. Yet simply to have her with him, not saying much—and what she did say, of no importance—seemed to fulfil his life as never before. Merely to touch the skin of her arm when she was not observing him was an exquisite pleasure. He kept on telling himself that this was, after all, still the honeymoon. But she had been his mistress before, there was no novelty in the physical thing; the novelty, indeed, was that they should be able to spend days together, not making love, but just existing. That was where the essential happiness seemed to be.

On the third day it was Dorothy who tentatively spoke of what they were finally to do. He sighed. It had been as though they were isolated from the whole world, in this crowded hotel on the fringe of the busiest beach in the county. But of course she was right; it could be only an interlude. In time he would create something permanent from it. On that he was now determined. He would try to persuade Olive to divorce him, though if she would not he would nevertheless continue to live openly with Dorothy in some other town. As for Gann, he would merely pay him off. It amounted to no more than that. Whatever the terms, he would accept them.

He sighed again. 'Yes, I suppose we shall soon have to start being practical. What do you want to do? Stay with me?'

'Yes.'

'There'll be hell to pay; you know that? Gann's out to make trouble.'

'Are you sure?' she asked. 'I thought this was what he wanted. That evening when you telephoned—he deliberately left me alone there.'

'He did?' Michael realized that he had never stopped to consider that evening, and why it had happened as it did.

'After you telephoned, he knew you'd come round. He said he was just going out for a little while. Then he gave me one of those smiles of his, and said, "If Mr. Padwick comes round, you'll entertain him properly, of course." He wanted to get rid of me anyway.'

'Why?'

She said in a low voice, 'I wouldn't do some things that he wanted me to do. I used to at one time, but after I got to know you I just couldn't any more.'

Michael went swiftly across to her and put his arm round her shoulders. 'At any rate, whatever happens you're never going back to him, I promise you that.'

Dorothy nodded, solemnly, but not as though she would weep.

'All the same,' he said, 'I don't think he did mean me to take you away. That wasn't what he was after.'

'Then what?'

Michael hesitated. 'Did he ever discuss his business affairs with you?' She shook her head. 'Well, he wanted me to advance a rather large sum of money—eighteen thousand pounds, in fact—to enable him to get hold of this property syndicate we're both in. I wouldn't do it, so he tried to get the money out of Olive on the threat of divorce proceedings.'

'He knew about us, then, all the time?'

'Yes,' Michael hesitated again. 'What he said was that you told him. I didn't believe that for a moment, of course. But what he also knew was that he couldn't get a

divorce because you and he had gone on living in the the same house. It's called condonation. I consulted a solicitor about it. What Gann wanted the other evening, I think, was for us to make love to each other there and then, so that he could catch us. He doesn't really want to divorce you, darling, he wants to blackmail me and Olive.'

Almost as he said it, the telephone rang. He picked it up and the telephonist's voice said, 'There's a gentleman in the lounge asking for you, sir. Mr. Gann.'

'Well I'm damned! Oh, hallo, sorry—I was talking to someone in the room. Ask him to wait, and I'll ring you back in a minute.'

He put down the phone and turned to face Dorothy. It was not that the man was there that alarmed him, so much as the patness of the announcement; the sort of coincidence that, in smaller matters, one would dismiss with a laugh and a 'Speak of the devil.' For a moment Michael had the feeling of something uncanny about the man. But then he shook that off. It was not really surprising that he should have been able to trace them to the hotel, and the rest was coincidence.

To Dorothy he said quietly, 'He's here. He's waiting downstairs.'

'Gann?' She said it, not so much with surprise as with an accent of fatality; as though she had known that he would be there, if not now, then later.

'Do you want to see him?' he asked. She shook her head.

'Very well, you shan't. I'll go down to the lounge. You stay here. I could just refuse to see him,' he mused, 'but that would probably be stupid. No, I'd better see him. But stay here, darling, till I come back.'

'It'll be over now,' she said.

'Nonsense. It'll never be over between us. Trust me?'

She looked up as he stood over her, then nodded, and he kissed her. 'I'll get rid of him,' he said. 'There's nothing he can do.'

All the same, as Michael shut the door behind him and went down in the lift, he could not avoid a tremor. Suppose in fact the man started a rumpus, claimed that it was his wife upstairs; what would the hotel do?

The lounge was nearly empty at this time of day, and at first he could see no one there. Then he saw Gann in a chair at the far end, near the window. He was in profile to Michael, and his protuberant forehead, swarthy head, thick eyebrows were dark against the window. Michael walked over and sat beside him. Gann came round slowly, smiling a little.

'Ah, good morning, Mr. Padwick.'

'I won't ask how you found out I was here, because it's obvious.'

'News does get around.'

'Nor will I hide from you that Dorothy's here with me. You know it, and you probably intended it.'

Gann raised a hand in mock protest. 'Come, Mr. Padwick, that's not a nice thing to say to a man.'

'I'm not mincing words with you. Tell me why you came, and what you want.'

The other man gazed slowly out of the window, and then brought an innocent look back towards Michael. 'I had to pop in at the syndicate office this morning, Mr. Padwick. So when my business was done, I thought I'd come on to see you.'

'Well?'

'Mr. Mark Grimshaw was at the office this morning. He'd come down from London, to do a little deal. And I

had a word with him about the matter we were discussing before. Mr. Grimshaw thinks we ought to do something about that soon, or he may not be able to keep the offer open.'

'You know I'm not playing.'

'Mr. Grimshaw's been very patient. Very patient indeed. But we can't expect him to wait for ever.'

Michael leaned forward. 'Look here, Gann, let's cut this nonsense and get down to what matters. Dorothy and I have run away together.' He paused, looking at the man. 'I suppose you still have the right to be angry, even after the way you've behaved to her. She is legally your wife.'

'There's no gainsaying that, Mr. Padwick.'

'But the fact is that we're in love. We're both serious about this. You're very welcome to divorce her. We want to get married. I hope to get my wife to divorce me.'

'And do you think she will?'

'That's my affair.'

'Come now, I can claim an interest in it. You think I've behaved badly to my wife, but suppose I have her interest at heart. I have to consider, if I divorce her, whether you can marry her. It might leave her in a very difficult legal situation.'

'No need to worry about that. I shall always look after her.'

'That's what you say now, in the first flush of your—honeymoon, I suppose you could call it, Mr. Padwick?' He grinned. 'But what when the honeymoon's over?'

Michael wanted to flare at him, but restrained himself. After all, the man had some right. So he said nothing. Gann looked reflectively around, and then he said, 'But do we have to have all this trouble?'

'I don't get you.'

'We're both men of the world, I take it, Mr. Padwick. Suppose we could come to some arrangement, eh?'

'Hadh't you better talk plainly? What are you getting at?'

Gann leaned forward, his face sharp for the first time. 'All right, plain talking. I need that eighteen thousand pounds to get control of the syndicate. I don't very much care what I do to get it. Is that plain enough?'

Michael laughed. 'Can't you see the whole situation has changed? In a sense, it was you who changed it. You went out deliberately on Tuesday night, didn't you? hoping that you'd get evidence for divorce. Well, you got it all right, George. But you got more than you bargained for. Now I want the divorce. You can't blackmail me with that threat any longer. And you can't blackmail Olive either, because it's public anyway, or soon will be. You've had it.'

Gann tutted, as though embarrassed. 'All this wild talk! Who says anything about blackmail? Come to that, Mr. Padwick, it's you, not me, who keeps on talking about divorce. Is that necessary?'

'What do you mean?'

'If we were partners in the syndicate, would I want to get mixed up in a divorce case? It's not likely.'

'You still haven't said what you mean.'

With his face turned away from the window, outside which the sun was glaring, it was difficult to watch the man's expression. But he seemed now to be more intense.

'You said plain talking, Mr. Padwick. All right, I'll take you at your word. I don't really give a damn what happens to my wife. She was a tart when I picked up with her—now, steady on, you said plain talk—and for all I care she can go back to being a tart now I've done with

her. I don't have to divorce her. I could simply forget all about her.'

In a low, disgusted voice, Michael said, 'You're in fact offering her to me, for money? There's a very dirty word for that.'

Gann grunted. 'And no need to use it. Not that I take any stock in words, dirty or otherwise. But I'm not asking you for any money. All I'm asking is that you come in with me on the syndicate deal. Later on, if you want, you could withdraw, sell out. I need you and your money now, quick. But it won't cost you anything. It could make you a profit.' He suddenly broke into a smile. 'You may need that, Mr. Padwick, with two women to keep.'

Michael lay back in his chair, feeling sick; not sick at what the man was proposing, but at himself for not instantly blazing up at him; at himself, for wondering even for a moment whether this might not be a way.

'Let's look at it as men of the world,' Gann continued in a careful voice. 'I don't suppose we're either of us particularly religious, so we needn't worry too much about that. As for the woman, you want her, and I don't. So the obvious arrangement . . .'

'You're talking nonsense,' answered Michael, ashamed that he should even be discussing it. 'You're forgetting that I'm married too.'

'And to a charming lady, Mr. Padwick. And, naturally, she's most upset. We're all being very unfair to Mrs. Padwick. But what's she most upset about, I wonder, if you get to the heart of it? I'd say she fears a public scandal, and if that were avoided, she'd be easier in her mind about anything else.'

'You know very little about my wife.'

'That's true, of course. That's true. But I've had a few dealings with women in my time, and they're not so

different. If a situation exists, and it's private-like, a woman comes to accept it, Mr. Padwick. I won't say happily, but she comes to accept it. Mrs. Padwick'd get used to the idea, I don't doubt, in time.'

It could perhaps be true. It might be that, after much unhappiness, Olive would at last accept such an arrangement. For the sake of her home. For the sake of the children, of the child she had yet to bear. He realized with a flood of guilt that he had practically forgotten that. He had deliberately, until now, prevented himself from considering that it was while his wife was pregnant with his child that he had gone away with another woman. Looked at nakedly, it was nauseating. And yet in the next thought came Dorothy, and that was, for him, irresistible.

Gann had sat in silence watching him. Now he cleared his throat and said, 'I wish you had more time to think this over, Mr. Padwick. But I'm afraid you haven't. Mr. Grimshaw's getting impatient.'

'To hell with Grimshaw. And you too. What do you imagine you'll do if I don't agree to come in with you? What sort of threat have you that I give a damn about any longer? None. You'd better face it. None. There's nothing you can do to me now. Nor to Olive either.'

'I can't see that I ever wanted to,' said Gann, smiling.

'As for Dorothy, you have it in your power to refuse a divorce, I suppose. But we don't care. Get that? We don't care. You can do what you like. Dorothy and I are going to live together, married or unmarried. So stay away from us, see? And stay away from Olive,' he added, suddenly thinking of that. 'I'm warning you there. If I hear that you've been bothering her, Gann, I'll break your bloody neck.'

Again Gann smiled. 'I've a very great respect for Mrs. Padwick. I'll not be bothering her.'

Suspiciously, Michael asked, 'Have you been? Have you been up there while I've been away?'

'I did call once, on Wednesday evening, when it began to be clear what had happened.'

'Now look here,' said Michael, threatening, 'I'll not have it. That'll be the last time you'll see my wife, understand?'

'Didn't see her then, come to that.'

'She refused to see you?'

'No, it wasn't that. But what with the doctor around, and the nurse . . .'

Michael stared at him. 'What do you mean? Has something happened to her? Tell me at once.'

'It's hardly my place to go carrying news to you about your family affairs.'

Michael leaned forward and took hold of his lapel. 'Tell me now.'

With his first gesture of annoyance, as though he loathed to be touched, Gann pushed the hand away.

'I'll thank you to keep your hands to yourself,' he said in a voice that had gone hard. 'If you want to know what's happened to your wife, why don't you go home and find out?'

'Tell me.'

Gann shrugged. 'Very well. She's had a miscarriage.'

'You mean, the baby . . . ? Born dead?'

'A miscarriage, so I understand.'

'And is Olive all right? Tell me, man, tell me.'

'So far as I know, Mrs. Padwick is ill, but recovering. And very sorry I was to hear of her trouble. I have some respect for Mrs. Padwick.'

ON the outskirts of Brighton, directly he was clear of the speed limit, Michael drove his car hard. He had not phoned. What could he say on the phone? It was better simply to go there, as soon as he could. He was still dazed, though his mind was slowly clearing.

This was his fault. He knew that. When he had flared up at Gann in the hotel lounge, almost wanting to knock him down for bringing the news, it was merely a blind attempt to cover up his own guilt in his mind. And the man had behaved with unexpected decency. He had simply shrugged, and gone. 'We'll talk again later,' was all he had said, as though the sight of Michael's distress was the first of all these events to have touched him.

This was his fault. The blame was his. As he had hurried up to the hotel room to tell Dorothy, he had tried to feel anger against her, for tempting him. But he knew it was not so. When he told her what had happened, she was sympathetic; not particularly upset, of course, but sympathetic.

'You going back to see her?' she asked, unprompted.

'Yes. I must.'

'When? Now?'

'Yes. Look, darling,' he said, going to kneel beside her and put his arm round her, 'this doesn't make any difference to us. I'd have given anything for it not to have happened. As you know, I'm very fond of Olive. I hate her to be hurt. But I'm still in love with you.'

She nodded, looking gravely at him.

'You do believe that?' he asked. 'Please believe it. This makes everything far more difficult, I know. But

it won't change it, I swear. You're my love, now and always.'

Again she nodded. 'You'd better go.'

'Yes. You stay here. I may be away for a day or two, I don't know. But stay here. Oh blast, they said these rooms were taken from Monday. But I'll be back before then. Anyway, I'll talk to the desk on my way down. If I'm still away, and they have to have this room, they'll find us another.'

Suddenly she asked, 'You are coming back? Truly?'

'Of course. Haven't I just told you, I'm in love with you? This is sad, but it'll change nothing.'

He thought, as he reached to kiss her lips, that he felt a sense of doubt in her. But there was nothing useful he could say. Her doubt would be dispelled when he returned.

On the way from the room he had said, 'If Gann tries to see you, don't let him.'

And she had said nothing, but had shaken her head.

Now, as he got his car on to the open road and put on speed, he wondered for the first time where Gann had gone after leaving the hotel. Would he try to get hold of Dorothy? But why should he? What advantage would that be to him?

Had he, in fact, now any advantage in anything? Michael doubted it. The man's plan had fallen through. He would not get the help he needed to gain control of the syndicate. Probably the only chance in his lifetime of a fortune was now denied to him. Might he then turn spiteful? Possibly. But what could he do? Michael dismissed him from his thoughts, and concentrated on driving.

The familiar road, which had always seemed to him so friendly, was now, somehow, menacing. The downs

looked heavy, though the sunlight glowed on the whiteness of the chalk-pits. He drove fast, just managing at one corner to swing clear of a lorry driving fast in the other direction. Michael swore and the swearing itself brought him back a little more towards normality. As the town came into sight he slowed carefully. Indeed at this moment he wished to spin out the time, to defer the meeting. Although he knew every shop and every house in the High Street, they appeared vaguely fresh and unfamiliar, as one's own sitting-room does when one returns from a holiday. A few of the people whom he recognized as he drove past were like strangers whom he had not expected to meet. As he turned into The Grange, the trees seemed to be arching higher over the avenue than he remembered, even after such a short absence; and the gate of his house, which invariably stood open, was now closed. He pulled the nose of his car against it and got out to open it. The question as to whether he should put the car into the garage, or stand it in front of the door as though on a temporary call, then exercised him unduly, until he told himself not to be such a blasted fool, and ran it into the garage.

The front door was latched, so he opened it with his key, stepping into the hall which was cool and dim because the curtains were drawn across the tall window. For a moment the sight of the curtains terrified him, but then he realized that they had been drawn only as protection against the sun, for the windows of the sitting-room beyond were bare.

It was very quiet. He looked into the sitting-room, but there was nobody there. Nor was there anybody in the kitchen. He peered into the garden. Nobody. As he came back into the hall he was startled by a figure walking silently downstairs. It was Lucy Colwell. But she was the

more startled of the two, jumping and grasping at the bannister rail when she suddenly saw him.

'Hallo, Lucy,' he said gently. 'I only heard about Olive today. How is she?'

'She's all right.'

The old woman hesitated, then collected herself and came on slowly downstairs.

'I take it that you've been looking after her,' he said.

'Somebody had to.'

'Thank you. It was good of you.'

Lucy Colwell was now standing in front of him, staring up at him with hostility, as though she would like to order him from his own house. But then she shrugged and said, 'We can't stand here in the hall.' And led the way into the sitting-room.

'Where are the children?' he asked.

'Joan has taken them off to her mother's cottage for a few days. We couldn't have them here.'

'No, of course not. You're staying here? You've been very kind.' He paused, then, 'You must be thinking some hard things about me.'

The old woman sniffed. 'No affair of mine.'

'I'll not try to explain. It's just something that has happened, and no help for it. But I hope you'll believe me when I say how deeply sorry I am for the distress I've caused Olive.'

He saw that Lucy was now weeping a little. This he found more moving than he had expected, and he turned away towards the window, trying not to embarrass her. He could hear her sniffing into her handkerchief. When she seemed calmer, he asked, 'Is it common knowledge in the town, what's happened? I suppose it is.'

'People are curious, of course,' she admitted, now in better control of her voice, 'But I said you'd gone to

Scotland on a business trip and we couldn't get into touch with you.'

'I see. That was good of you.'

'That Mr. Gann knows, of course.'

'Yes. I've met him. It was he who told me about Olive.'

'He came up here on Wednesday evening,' said Lucy. 'I saw him. He behaved himself better than I expected. I was going to ask him, for Olive's sake, to keep everything quiet as long as he could, but he said it first. He said he'd told everybody his wife had gone to Liverpool to see her mother.'

'So nobody really knows yet?'

'No. But they will.' Suddenly she burst into tears again. 'Oh, Michael, why did you do it? It nearly killed her.'

He turned swiftly towards her, wondering whether to touch her with sympathy, but better not. 'I've no excuses, Lucy. I know that. Tell me what happened, and how she is.'

He thought the old woman might collapse, so he managed to seat her in a chair, where she gradually regained control of herself, though her fingers fidgeted with the piping on the arm. 'On Tuesday night she telephoned me and asked me to come round. When I got here, she seemed distracted. She said that you'd been gone for three hours, and for a long time I couldn't get her to say where you'd gone. When she did, I began to understand. At last I persuaded her to telephone Mr. Gann. He told her that he hadn't seen you, but that his wife had gone too. After that, Olive had an attack of hysteria.' The old woman seemed lost in the recollection of that. After a while she continued, 'In the end I got her to bed. And of course I stayed the night.'

'You've been a true friend.'

She looked up at him without hostility for the first time, as though grateful for the praise. But then the memory darkened her face again. 'Next day, in the middle of the morning, she had a haemorrhage. I got the doctor in time, thank God. He told me afterwards that for an hour he thought we should lose her. But she rallied. The doctor wanted her to go to hospital, but she refused to leave the house. So he managed to get a nurse.'

'Is the nurse still here?'

'Yes. She's gone out for a walk, and I'm relieving her for a couple of hours.'

'Lucy, you have been a brick.' a fine fellow

But this time the recollection was too close and she did not abate her anger. 'What are you going to do?' she asked.

'I'd like to go up and see her. May I?'

'I don't mean now. I mean, what are you going to do about—about everything.'

'It's all so confused,' he uneasily said, avoiding. 'Is she well enough for me to see her, Lucy?'

'I doubt it.'

'Won't you ask her?'

The old woman hesitated, and was about to go to the door when it opened. Olive was standing there. Lucy ran across, crying, 'My darling, you shouldn't have got out of bed.' But Olive held her side, staring at Michael. She was wearing a flowered housecoat that she had not previously been able to get into because of her pregnancy, but now, of course . . . He caught himself up in that thought, took a pace towards her, and said. 'I'm damn sorry, Olive.'

'Lucy, dear, would you please leave us?'

'But you ought to be in bed,' the old woman protested. 'Let me get you back to bed, my darling.'

'No. I want to talk to Michael. Lucy, would you please go upstairs?'

Her face and neck were pale with loss of blood. He went across to help her to a seat, but she would not let him touch her. She moved to the seat, unsteadily, but on her own. Lucy hesitated at the door, then suddenly burst into sobs and left the room. As Michael went across to shut the door he saw her fleeing up the stairs, still weeping. Then he turned back into the room. 'I'm damn sorry, Olive,' he repeated.

'You know what's happened to me?'

'Yes, I do. Directly I knew I came straight here. Are you better now?'

'Better enough.'

'Are you sure you ought to be down here? Lucy said you should be in bed.'

She gestured impatiently and he was silent.

'How can I ever forgive you?' she asked at last.

'I don't suppose you can. I wouldn't dare ask you to try. All I can say is that. . . . Oh well, I won't start explaining. There's no point.'

'To leave me,' she said in a low, angry voice, 'and your children, and a child yet to be born, to run off with that slut!'

He said nothing, for she was entitled to hurt him.

'How dared you?' she suddenly blazed up. 'Michael, how dared you?'

He turned away, stepping towards the window. 'What's the use? It doesn't help to talk like that. It happened, and that's all there is to say about it.'

'It's not all I intend to say about it. The biggest insult you could have offered me. And after all your promises.'

'I tried, Olive. You know that. I failed, that's all.'

'You talk as though it were some slight thing,' she

said, her anger growing. 'I believed you, and on the strength of those promises I consented to have another baby.' He knew that was untrue, but it was useless to make debating points. 'Another baby, who now won't be born. She would have been a girl, did you know that? You killed her, Michael. You murdered your daughter as surely as if you'd waited until she was born, and then strangled her.'

She was almost screaming now. The pitch of hysteria was coming into her voice. He went quickly across to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

'Now come, Olive, calm down. It doesn't help you to go on like that. It's not surprising, my dear, you're weak from exhaustion. You'd far better go back to bed, and we'll talk later.'

At that she burst into tears, putting up her hands to grasp his and press it against her cheek. 'Oh, Michael,' she wailed, 'why did you do this to me?'

'I'm truly sorry. I can't explain. It was one of those things.'

'Such a terrible insult. I'm a woman, Michael, with the pride and the feelings of a woman, and when my husband. . . .' She broke off into tears, still clutching his hand.

'Hadn't you better go back to bed, and we'll talk later? You're upsetting yourself to no purpose.'

She shook her head sadly. 'No. I've got to talk to you now. I want to know.'

'Know what?'

Releasing his hand, she seemed calmer now. 'I'm not a fool. I know that such things do happen, and there's always a reason. I want to know the reason.'

Perplexed and doubtful, he lowered himself slowly into the chair opposite her. If she insisted on talking, and so

long as she didn't get hysterical, perhaps it would be better for her to do so.

'I still think you ought to be in bed. And I don't see how these things can really be explained or reasoned about at all. But if you want to try, if that's how you feel . . .'

Now she seemed to have control of herself, nodding her head in almost humble supplication.

'I've been thinking about it a lot while you've been away. It's gone over and over in my head. Oh, I can't tell you what it's been like. At first I was just blind with anger. Then there was my illness. But since then I've lain in bed, and I begin to see things more clearly. I understand now that it wasn't all your fault. Some of it was mine.'

He protested that that was absurd, but she cut him short.

'No, it isn't absurd. You went off with that woman because there was something you wanted that I wasn't giving you. That must be so. I realize that now. It's terribly important to me to find out what that was.'

'But, Olive, one can't analyse a thing like this. It doesn't make sense. There are things that none of us understand, even when we're taking part in them.'

'I'm starting to understand. And perhaps that was what was missing before—that I didn't understand. I've been asking myself over and over again what she could give you that I hadn't. It's not only the physical thing, is it, Michael?'

'Look here,' he said uneasily, 'this is silly. We can't go on like this.'

'But I must. I must. I've got to understand. When I was lying there, and I didn't know whether you'd come back, I thought I'd go mad if I couldn't understand.'

She said this calmly and without her previous hysteria, as though stating a fact, and Michael looked at her covertly, with apprehension. Women who had just suffered physically as she had were liable, he vaguely knew, to be temporarily unbalanced, and he feared an incautious word that could set her off.

'She's prettier than I, and younger,' she said. 'I know that. But those seem rather insufficient reasons.'

'Of course they are. It isn't simple.'

'And it isn't really her, is it? It's me.'

'For heaven's sake stop blaming yourself.'

'But I do. I've been looking hard at myself since you went away, and trying to see myself. I've been dull, haven't I? Dull, and settled, and not very demonstrative.'

'Look, Olive, you're trying to find motives and reasons that are just not there. I don't see you as dull, I assure you. I have the most profound respect for you.'

'Do you love me?'

He got up from the chair and walked across the room. 'Who can ever answer that question?'

'You've answered it now, haven't you? Suppose she'd asked you. Would you have made the same reply?'

'You're torturing yourself,' he said, sitting down on the couch. 'It's just no use talking about it, Olive. It only makes things worse.'

Suddenly she came across to him, almost stumbling in her walk, and threw herself down beside him, leaning across his knees, grasping his forearms. 'Michael, listen to me. I'll change. I know that I've been ordinary and cold, perhaps. But, darling, I'll do my best to become what you want me to be.'

'It just has nothing to do with that,' he faintly protested.

'But I know that it has. You're simply trying to spare

my feelings. I realize now that I've let myself go of late years, not cared enough about what you thought of me. I've made up my mind to change all that. I'll buy attractive clothes. I'll become a smart woman, darling, whom you'll be rather proud of.' She laughed a little. 'It sounds like a good excuse to spend money on my back.'

He was sweating now at every step she took which he must, in the end, force her to retrace; but he did not know how to stop her.

'And, Michael, you and I must have a brighter time of it. Let's go on a holiday, darling, just us two—Paris, perhaps. Oh, that'd be too hot just now. Copenhagen. Let's go to Copenhagen, darling. Lucy would look after the children.'

Gently he tried to free his arms, but she clung the tighter.

'I don't know why we shouldn't be the happiest couple in the world,' she said. 'We're very lucky. We've got plenty of money. Now we've had our quarrels and our bitterness, and somehow we'll get over all that. You are a little fond of me, aren't you?'

'You know that I'm very fond of you,' he said thickly. 'I would give a great deal not to have hurt you.'

'But that's past. Let's bury the past. In a way, I'm glad of it, for it's taught me a lesson.' She moved her face closer to him. 'And, Michael, this is what I'm really trying to say, though it's difficult for a woman to say it. When we make love. It hasn't been what it should have been for you, has it?'

He started to protest, but she put her fingers on his mouth. 'No, don't try being polite. Of course it hasn't, or you wouldn't have gone off with another woman. I can face facts now, darling, that I wouldn't admit existed before.' Her voice had dropped almost to a

whisper. 'I'm afraid I'm not very experienced, Michael. But perhaps, because of all this, I want you more than I ever did. Oh, darling, I'm feeling shamed, and there ought to be no shame between us.'

'Please stop this.'

'You must teach me,' she whispered. 'There's nothing a mistress can give you that I will refuse.' Her eyes were bright and her pale skin faintly flushed, as though in a fever. 'You can do what you want with me.'

At this last abasement, Michael could stand no more. He lifted her firmly back on to the couch, away from him. 'Stop it. I told you to stop. Do you want to destroy the affection I have for you—the respect?'

'Yes. If, in its place, you'll love me.'

'It's no use, Olive,' he said wearily. 'I've told you it's no use. I tried. I tried for months, you know that. I intended never to see Dorothy again. I thought I'd got her out of my system. But then, by accident, it happened. And now it's final. You must accept that.'

'You're going to leave me for her? You'll make a public scandal?'

He hesitated. 'No, no. There's no such necessity. After all, divorce is not such an unusual thing.'

'I've told you. I will not divorce you.'

He shrugged. 'Then it's you who are forcing the scandal, unless . . .'

'Unless what?'

Gann's soft words had come back into his thoughts. If it's private-like, a woman comes to accept it. Mrs. Padwick'd get used to the idea, I don't doubt, in time.

But he repudiated that. It would be too degrading to Olive even to speak of it.

'Unless what?' she insisted.

'Nothing.'

'You've got to tell me. What were you going to say?'

'It won't work.'

'Tell me.'

'I was going to say,' he blurted out, 'that if it's the public scandal that most worries you, there need be nothing public.'

This puzzled her. 'You mean, you would give her up?'

Turning away, he muttered. 'No. I told you it wouldn't work.'

'Then you mean that you'd keep her as your mistress on the quiet, and I would know but say nothing?' She began to laugh, high-pitched. 'That's a fine, worthy suggestion. But you're right, it wouldn't work. Even if I agreed, there's Gann.'

'Oh, him. He could be bought off. It was his idea.'

For a moment she did not understand this. When she did, she almost collapsed back on the couch, crying, 'It's a filthy, horrible . . . Oh, God help me.' She began to sob, wildly now. 'God help me. For I thought I could agree.'

Doubtful, he went quietly over and touched her hair. But she flinched away from him. 'Then she twisted round to face up to him. 'But I won't,' she shouted. 'Do you understand? I won't. I'm your wife, and I'll stay your wife. And if you think I'd consent to your having that common little slut as a mistress, going from my bed to hers. . . .'

'I didn't think so,' he wearily protested.

'But you hoped. Oh yes, you did. Well, you can stop hoping. You're mine, and I won't have you shame us all with that disgusting woman. You'll give her up. Do you hear, Michael, do you hear?'

Suddenly raising herself on her knees on the couch, with her hair falling around her face, she beat at his arm with her fists, shrieking, 'Do you hear? Do you hear?'

He grasped her wrists and held her for a moment, though she twisted away, almost snarling.

'Stop it,' he commanded. 'Olive, stop this.'

She merely twisted the more, starting to laugh hysterically. The compassion he had felt for her was now changing into anger. She jerked her head to a standstill, staring at him, and began to abuse Dorothy, letting out a string of names at him, shocking him. His anger was turning cold. He unclasped his right hand from her wrist, and deliberately slapped her cheek hard, the red mark showing in a moment as she suddenly fell absolutely silent, absolutely still. Staring at him.

'That's better,' he said. He released her other wrist and turned away towards the window, then turned again to face her.

'Now, Olive, if you've quite stopped having hysterics, we'll talk sense.' His voice was as hard and unrepentant, and as angry, as he now felt. 'I didn't want to discuss any of this until later, when you were stronger. But you've forced me. Very well. I'm in love with Dorothy, and I'm not in love with you. I'm sorry, but these are the facts. I want to marry Dorothy, and we shall both try to get divorced. But that's up to you. Whether you divorce me or not will make no real difference.'

'You're going away to live with her?'

'Yes. Whatever happens.'

'In spite of me? In spite of the children? You don't think of their happiness?'

'I've tried all that, as you know. I've tried, and it won't do. I'll make it all as easy as you'll let me, if you will let me. But if you won't, then you must take the consequences. Frankly, I no longer care in the least what you think or do. As for the children—well, it can't be helped, that's all.'

For a long minute, kneeling up on the couch, her hair

wild, she stared at him in silence. Her eyes looked so peculiar that he had a fleeting dismay that she might really have, for the moment, left her senses.

'Come now, Olive,' he began, placatory, taking a step towards her. But she held up her hand to stop him, and suddenly said, in a low voice, 'I'll kill myself.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'I would rather be dead,' she cried, her voice starting to shriek again. 'I would rather be dead.'

With a swiftness that startled him she slipped from the couch and made for the door, tugging it open, running across the hall.

'Olive,' he called, uncertainly. He moved after her to the open door. He was vaguely aware that Lucy Colwell, hearing the noise no doubt, was standing at the top of the stairs, peering over in distress.

Olive had rushed across the hall and into his room, slamming the door behind her. Suddenly he thought—his revolver. He ran heavily across the hall, shouting her name. As he clutched at the handle of the door to his room, he thought it was locked. But no, he was merely clumsy in his haste, and he thrust the door open. She was standing behind his desk, her body doubled forward as though in pain or winded, and one hand reaching into the drawer to drag out his revolver. She clutched the piece of flannel in which it was wrapped and tumbled it loudly on to the desk top. Then she flung the rag away and snatched up the weapon. She was gasping, pressing her free hand to her body where it was bent, just below her breasts.

'Put it down and don't be silly,' he said, as calmly and quietly as he could.

'I tell you I'll kill myself. Unless you swear this minute to give that woman up, I'll kill myself.'

It was, of course, nonsense. Not exactly bluff. She was not playing a conscious part. But she was working up a hysteria, in which there lay the remote but appalling possibility that she might, in fact, loose off the gun at herself. He must keep cool. He must reduce her hysteria. Suddenly he knew how to do it.'

'That's for you to choose,' he said coldly.

'You can say that to me?'

'Why not? It's your life. If you want to end it, that's up to you.'

'I warn you, I mean it.' She was not screaming now, but the tense, low voice in which she spoke seemed even more hysterical. 'I warn you, Michael, I mean it.'

Again he was gripped with a sudden fear that she really might. If he gave her one word of sympathy, he instinctively knew, he would inflame the hysteria to the point at which she really might.

He forced himself to keep a still face. 'Go on, then,' he deliberately said. 'Why don't you? It would solve all my problems, wouldn't it? Go on, then. Kill yourself.'

Abruptly he turned to walk away. Her face twisted with rage, and she fired the revolver at his back. He clutched at the lintel of the door, slipped, twisted round and fell facing her, his eyes shocked. Quite calmly she walked across and fired three more bullets into his stomach. Then she walked back, her face without expression and sat in the chair behind his desk, where Lucy Colwell, rushing downstairs in horror, found her.

